

just **FRIEND**

book 1



GRACE GERVAS



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Just a
FRIEND

Grace Gervas

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CHAPTER 1

It was one summer morning when Mrs. Theresa Ashton received a call from her friend abroad, she seemed all excited unlike her usual mood swings that scared everyone off. She was a very classy lady, fair complexion with dark short-styled hair. Theresa was surrounded by nothing but elegance.

With much enthusiasm she followed her children in the garden to give them the good news "Chris! Carolyn darling, may I have a moment?" She run towards the two siblings who were in the middle of a conversation. Carolyn, the younger, pouted; as if she knew that whatever her mother had to say, was never going to be pleasant. Although she inherited her mother's beauty, she was absolutely the opposite of her. The idea of being a noble-mannered lady portrayed as an exhaustion, she was a rebel.

"There comes the queen, I think I'm calling a rain check soon!" She whispered to her brother and they both tried to make a smile.

"We're here mom, what is it?" Chris responded lovingly, before exchanging a knowing glance with Caro.

"Okay my children, guess what. . ." She paused, "Do you

remember Abigail? Abbie? My friend Julia's daughter? we met them on your tenth birthday Christian"

After a long thinking, Chris nodded, "Um. . . well. . . I was only ten mother, right?. . . okay let's say I remember her, So?"

Caro jumped abruptly, "Okay everyone! since I don't know any Ebbie or whatever I--" she gathered her stuffs but Theresa cut her short.

"Abbie! It's Abbie sweetheart! And where do you think you're going Carolyn!"

"Fine, Abbie! I don't know her--so I don't think you need me here. I'll go make myself useful somewhere else. Kisses bro, love you mom!" She let out a crooked smile and left.

"Oh this girl! I think there must've been a mistake at the hospital. They could've switched or swapped her with another child, I can't believe she's actually my daughter with--" she stood halfway as her eyes rested on her son who was laughing heartily. "My Darling son, only you understands me!" She pat his palm.

"Alright mom, you were saying?" Chris snapped.

"Oh Abbie! Well, the girl is coming tomorrow. She's admitted to your college and I was thinking of letting her

stay here for few days. Would you be kind enough to pick her at the airport dear?" They continued the conversation and in the end Chris agreed.

MEANWHILE. Sarah, the cook at the Ashton residence was on the phone with her daughter, Hanna who was supposed to arrive on the next day ready to start her studies in the same college on the coming week.

"God help me with this child of mine. I don't know how she managed to finish high school!" She was murmuring to herself when Herman, the gardener entered the kitchen.

"What's wrong Sarah. Trouble with the soup?"

"I wish the recipe was my only trouble in this world. It's Hanna, She'll be here tomorrow instead of today. To think that I only had a permission for today. Oh whatever. She'll have to find her way here." She said in frustration.

"Is that all? Hey relax woman, I can give you a hand. I'll go pick her up if you're that worried!"

"Really? Oh Herman, I'll be very grateful. Hanna is such a troublemaker that's why I'm afraid to let her wander

the city alone." At last it was decided. The night went by and the new day began.

CHRIS ARRIVED at the airport five minutes earlier the flight's arrival-time. He rushed towards the arrivals curb, just to realize that he'd lost Abbie's phone number. He quickly made a call to his mother but she wasn't picking. Decidedly, he tried the home number, yet no one answered. Frustratedly, he run a hand through his black hair in search of another solution.

There was only one way given the running time, he had to use a name-board. Evidently he couldn't write Abigail on it, since it was a common name, hence wrote Ashton instead, hoping that she'd understand. Minutes passed, a lot of passengers passed by, some met their escorts, relatives and whomever possible and others left straight to the exit. His eyes stuck to any young lady that would pass but none of them seemed to be her. He tried again to call at the mansion but it was the same. When he almost gave up, some girl dressed up in loose denims with leather jacket and Snickers, tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey mister. Who still does that old-fashioned gestures nowadays? Don't you have a cellphone?" She snapped at

Christian who looked almost startled.

"Excuse me, are you talking to me?" He asked while gazing around.

She smirked before putting her cap off, her medium blonde-hair fell down her shoulders. She shook her head a little and lifted her eyes to face him. "Ashton?" She referred, pointedly to the piece of sign he was holding, "Aren't you here to pick me up?" She glared at him "I thought changing my flight would save me from this charade. . . She really caught on this time, maybe I should change my strategy" She muttered to herself.

Chris looked flustered for a while, but then realized the situation. "Oh you must be Abb--" Before he could finish his sentence, that girl's phone buzzed and she immediately placed a finger on Chris's lips.

"Oh no! It's my mother! I don't want her to find out I've arrived!" She said while staring at the ringing phone.

Chris pulled her finger away. "What do you think you're doing?" He snapped, angrily.

"Sheesh! You have a car, right?" She asked him and he nodded. "Great, let's go!" An enthusiastic smile spread her face. She pulled him to the exit without giving him a chance to retaliate until they reached the parking lot.

"Hey- hey. . .wait! What the heck do you think you're doing? No body drags me around like this okay?" He finally reacted by shouting, but surprisingly she was just staring at him, unblinkingly.

"What's your name?" She asked out of the blue.

"Christian"

"Christian?" She remained thoughtful for a while as if the name didn't ring the bell. "Okay whatever. Chris do you know any restaurant nearby? I'm famished!" She added. This time she left him completely stunned.

"Pardon!"

"Eating dude! I'm hungry. Where's your car anyway?"

For the first time in his life, Chris Ashton found himself in the hands of a total weirdo of a girl. He couldn't say anything more, other than fulfilling her silly request.

Once at the restaurant, He let her pick from the menu-list and stayed aside watching her as if she wasn't a girl he'd pictured in his mind no matter how imperfect his imagination was.

"You know, I thought you would be different. Maybe kind of. . . ." He broke the silence as her tray of chicken-salads with fries arrived.

"Different how?. . .Sort of a pretty girl? I'm sorry to disappoint you, spending hours in front of a mirror is terrible!" She prompted "Hey the food tastes great, are you sure you want to pass?" She immediately changed the subject. She never ceased to amaze him, the more he kept scrutinizing her.

"No thanks. Hurry up then, I'll wait for you in the car. I'm gonna take care of the bill!"

"What? Hold on!" She urged him. "First, I'm not letting you pay and second, I'm not done yet, How can we go in such a broad daylight."

Her words left him dumbfounded. He pulled a chair and resumed his seat. "Listen girl, I'm not here to fulfill your little whims! If you wanna stroll the city, do it some other time and with some other person." This time he used a very harsh tone but she didn't seem shaken at all, her face was expressionless.

"Isn't there something you like and haven't done in a long time?" She asked, Her lips stretched into a wide smile.

"What?"

"What do you like Chris? Swimming? Movie? Museums? Come on, tell me!"

"Oh no! What's wrong with this girl? Fine, I like horse-racing. I'm sure that's the least of your interest. So, shall we go now?" Chris replied, in a resigned manner, obviously tired of her impudence.

"I love it! Is there a place for that?" To his disgrace, she became enthusiastic once again, even though she'd lied about loving it.

"You do?" He asked and she nodded her head. His eyes showed a small sparkle, as if touched and ready to give in but suddenly darkened again. "No, we're going home and that's final" he stood up and walked out.

"How lame!" she mumbled to herself while following him.

She found Chris outside, leaning against his white SUV, a sullen look on his face. He was good-looking, fair height around 5'10ft or so, handsome brunnete. She contemplated his features for a while and found herself smiling. *Well he isn't so bad*, she thought. As their eyes met, he opened the door ready to hop in, when she suddenly grabbed his shirt. Furiously he returned to look at her and found her face so tender and imploring.

"Now what?" He snapped.

"Please Chris, I promise this'll be the last one. Horse-

racing I mean. Huh? Pleaseeee!"

Chris sighed heavily, vividly tired of her games. He thought for a while and replied, "You promise?"

"I promise!"

"Okay. There's one at *Old Derby*, Get in!"

"Yay! Thank you!" She screamed loudly and run like a child.

He took another deep sigh while shaking his head. "What a pain!" He muttered.

After placing their bets, they both took a seat with other racing fans as the game started. It was so noisy as everyone kept shouting the names and numbers of the competing horses.

"Hey, are you sure we've made a right choice?" The girl asked loudly in attempt to surpass the noises , as the horse they bet on kept lagging behind.

"Trust me. I know Domingo won't let us down!" He replied closer to her ear, while paying great attention to the game. Even that strange girl could spot the difference and failed to resist laugh. "What, is there something on my face?"

"No. Just your furrowed brow from overindulgence!"

She kept laughing.

"Oh come on. I'm only protecting my money!"

"Yeah. Suuuure!" She replied sarcastically. Suddenly, Domingo placed the leading spot and they both started shouting. "Yeah. There, there, come on boy?. . .Go!. . . Gooooo! Yes!" And it approached the finish line with an enormous speed, then finished the race a moment later.

Chris, with a tight grip, hugged her with joy, they both screamed loudly before pulling away, almost awkwardly. "The money! Let's go get our money!" He snapped and they both laughed.

Once the game was over they left with some cash they got out of that lucky day. As agreed she led the way to the car but Chris had a change of heart. This time he wanted to grab some drinks before they left, it was pretty hot.

"Heey, I thought you were no fun but I guess you do have it in you!" She slapped his back playfully while chuckling.

"Don't push it lady, or else I'll change my mind!" He snapped seriously

"Alright my bad! Shall we?" She decided to play safe. He walked first without realizing that she was pretending

smacking his head.

There was a juice bar across the street with amazing fresh smoothies. While having the fill, Chris took the most of the moment to ask her some questions.

"So, are you coming straight from South--"

"No. And don't you dare tell my mother. I left there a week ago." She replied even without hearing the full question.

"What? And where were you?" Chris was really surprised. Frankly, everything about that girl kept shocking him.

"Around. Hey this country is big. But well, I went for this summer camcamping. . . it was spectacular, I had a--" Another phone call from her mother interrupted her again. This time she decided to answer. "Yes mom. It's me, Hanna" she replied and continued. In the whole conversation the look on her face kept changing, and so did Chris's. They both realized that there was a huge misunderstanding. She put the phone aside and asked, "You? Who are you?"

"Hanna? Is that your name?" He snapped at her and she nodded. "Hanna? and not Abigail?"

"Yes. Hanna. And who the heck are you? I thought you were sent by. . ." She tried to explain but Chris

immediately grabbed his cellphone and found several missed calls from his mother. He had a brief call before turning his burning eyes.

"Damn it! You tricked me! Are you a phony? What do you want from me? money?" He asked her angrily, already on his toes.

"Pho-phony? You're crazy. Who the hell do you think you are to call me phony! Weren't you holding a board with an Ashton?"

"And so what? You thought you could rip me off some money because I'm an Ashton?"

"Eh? You must be delirious! Maybe we should call the police. This is kidnapping! How did you know I was going to the Ashton residence? You must be a criminal!" Hanna shouted. At the moment a lot of people were staring at them. Both of them looked suspicious of the other. Their debate took a while until they decided to calm down.

"So, according to you, you're also going to my house?" Chris asked her, attentively. "And also you're claiming that nanny Sarah sent you someone to pick you up and you thought that person was me?"

"Yes sir, do I have to write it down? Apparently your so called nanny Sarah is my mother! So, where is that Abbie

girl you mention endlessly?"

"She's on her way home, someone else picked her. Wait, Are you also coming from South Africa?"

"Eh? Hell no. I'm from South Wales, Sidney!"

"Just great! And why the heck didn't you tell me before!"

"Because you never asked you idiot!" Hanna replied and they started arguing all over again.

CHAPTER 2

Later that day, Chris drove back home after the never-ending argument he had with Hanna. They barely spoke the whole way as both sulked; each believed it was the other's fault.

Back to the mansion, Sarah was waiting outside restlessly. It was obvious that she knew her daughter perfectly well despite being apart for a long time. She jumped with relief when she finally saw the car approaching the main gate. She rushed over, impatiently, waiting for Chris to get off.

"Oh son, thank God you're here. You don't know how sorry I am for all the trouble you've gone through." Sarah snapped and he gently put his hands on her shoulder with a smile.

"Relax nanny! It's alright. Everything is okay now. Just--is she really your daughter?" He whispered his last question with an amused eyebrow, it even stabilized Sarah whose face drew a little smile. And at that moment, Hanna was taking her stuffs out while eyeing the two of them without a word. "Well nanny, not a word of this to Ms. Theresa please. . . I told her that I had a flat tyre and God knows what else, you know how handy she can get."

"Thank you so much Chris!" Sarah replied, gratefully.

"Don't mention. . . Now let me go and see her Majesty, with our new guest ofcourse!" He winked and shoot Hanna a sombre glance before leaving. At last the storm was over, not entirely though.

"How lovely! Don't I at least get a hug?" Hanna said, trying to look as innocent as she could but unfortunately, her mother didn't fall for it. Instead, she slapped her back hardly until she shuddered. "Ouch! That hurts mom!"

"Serves you right! I mean. . .can't you stay away from troubles even for a day? Is this how your aunt raised you?"

"Mooooom! I'm sorry!" She wrapped her arms around Sarah's stiff-slender body, and in a while she hugged her daughter back. "I missed you mom!"

"I missed you too my baby" Sarah replied, her tone of voice was jovial. When she finally pulled away she told her, "but that doesn't mean I forgive you! Now let's get your stuffs in because you've a lot of explaining to do young lady!" She made a stiff face but eventually they both laughed.

CHRISTIAN walked into the mansion and went straight to see his mother. As predicted, Theresa was making her evening rounds to make sure everything was in order; her usual routine which normally ended with few scoldings. "You better tell that useless Sarah to prepare a descent dinner. . . I don't know what I'm paying her for, she's always no where to be found when I need her" she told Maria, the maid and right that time Chris cleared his throat to present himself.

"I'm home mom!" He snapped. A plastic smile plastered on his face, he wasn't so good at lying. Theresa walked closer and started inspecting him with her sharp eyes

"My one and only son. So, are you okay? I don't see any trace of an accident though!"

"I'm fine mom. . . I said it was only a flat tyre! I'm really sorry, but I'm glad everything went fine"

"A flat tyre you say! Fine, I'll trust you son!" Theresa replied, but from the way she spoke, she didn't seem convinced at all and even Chris noticed that.

He immediately changed the subject. "So where is she? I should at least apologize to her!" He knew his mother's enthusiasm would return quickly if he spoke of her favorite things.

"Oh, of course you should darling. . . Abbie is inside, and she's such an adorable girl. I'm sure you two will get along very well"

"Mom please!"

"I mean it darling, you'll see"

"If you insist. But maybe I should wash up first. I'm really tired. Besides, I'm sure she must be resting now. Let's give her some privacy!" He suggested despite the disappointed look on Theresa's face.

"Maybe not. Look, there she comes" she snapped with a warm smile while eyeing the staircase.

When Chris tailed her gaze, he couldn't believe his eyes. Abigail was very pretty in her white maxi-dress; she was slender and tall, with long dark silky-hair, she looked more like an angel descending from heaven. He swallowed as she smiled deliciously with her pink-shaded lips. Without knowing she was already there, right in front of him, waiting eagerly for a formal introduction.

"Well, I'm glad you're here Abigail. I want you to meet Christian, I'm sure you don't remember him since you were so little when you both met"

"Hi. It's so nice to finally meet you Chris. I'm Abigail, you can call me Abbie" she said. Her voice was sweet, and

she spoke with great novelty. She extended a hand and he followed after snapping out of it.

"Uh--hi. Me too. And. . .I'm sorry about earlier, I didn't mean to stood you up!"

"It's okay. I forgive you." They locked eyes for a minute before pulling apart.

"Oh, aren't you two adorable? I'm sure you have a lot to talk about since you'll both attend the same college!" Theresa snapped, her remark left both of them surprised.

"Mom please! You're embarrassing her! We've just met, there'll be time for that later. Abbie, please make your self at home. And once gain, welcome" He told her politely and left. She nodded and turned to Theresa.

"Aunt, I didn't know your son is this handsome!"

"And a gentleman too!" added Theresa as they both made their way out.

Later that night, as Chris was resting in his bedroom there was knock and shortly after, Carolyn entered.

"Hey Chris, aren't you having dinner? Don't tell me you gonna miss the honor of dining with our 'dear Abbie' So what's the verdict?" She nudged her brother while

placing herself on the other side of the bed, it forced a smile out of him.

"Come on Caro. What verdict?"

"Abigail. Tell me what you think of her!" She cried.

"Well, she seems okay! She's pretty and. . .Well, I don't know Caro, she's just fine!"

"Really? So how many stars?"

"Five? four? Oh stop it, we're no longer kids for God's sake." He stood up and closed the door before returning to the bed. Carolyn was just laughing. "Now wait until I tell you the real story behind this awful day. . ." he explained the whole thing about Hanna and the eventful day they both had. In the end, Caro was staring at him with much disbelief

"No. That can't be. You mean you actually picked the wrong girl? And that's nanny Sarah's daughter? Gosh, what a crazy coincidence!"

"Crazy is understatement! You know. . . that's not the worst part!"

"I can only imagine duh. I'm sorry but she seems interesting, I really wanna meet her" laughingly, she remarked.

"I wouldn't be too sure if I were you. Anyways, none of this is at mom's knowledge, so don't open your big mouth please!"

"As if I would sit a minute with her and say mom guess what. . . Blah blah blah! Really? are you forgetting Theresa and I are mortal enemies?"

"She's our mom Caro"

"Yeah. Whatever!"

* * * *

The following day Sarah was in the kitchen as always, already making breakfast. It was Saturday and Hanna was already awake. Strangely, she was a bit enthusiastic about the kitchen, she even baked some muffins something that surprised her mother. The fresh aroma was so delicious that anyone would be tempted to have a bite.

"They smell nice, so you really know how to bake?" Sarah couldn't resist asking her, while poking her nose close to the oven.

"Only to bake mom, don't go overboard! Aunt Victoria does this often, I guess it was contiguous!" She replied, a

flash of happiness on her face. It's been a long time since they've been together, being there with her mother was something she yearned for. She helped with the dishes as Sarah went out for a while.

Suddenly, a female voice startled her. "Excuse me, can you get me a glass of milk, low fat!" She snapped lazily, her long fingers running through her long hair. Obviously, she'd just woke up. Hanna paused the dishes, and threw her a scornful glance. If there's one thing she hated, was to be pushed around.

"Good morning to you too ma'am! And I'm sorry, I don't know where the low fat milk is. . ." she replied, sarcastically of course. With such a remark, the furrowed brow on the other pretty girl's face was inevitable. She seemed really annoyed, her eyes flashed with rage as if it was the first time to be turned down her demands. But before any retaliation Sarah intervened;

"I'm very sorry miss, do you need anything?" She asked the lady, in a polite tone of voice.

"A glass of milk, low fat. Right?" Someone cut in, "Go on with your things nanny, I'll take care of this" it was Carolyn's voice that awakened all of them. She popped out of nowhere and walked towards the big French-door refrigerator. She grabbed a box of milk and poured a

glass, then handed it to the young lady with an undescrivable smile. "Here. . . I hope next time you won't forget where to find it Abbie! Unfortunately, everyone does their own things in this house. So it's better you get familiar with everything you need and where to find them" she added.

"What? And what are the maids for?" Abbie seemed more shocked than surprised. Her gaze shifted from Caro to the other two without hiding her frustration. Sarah tried to open her mouth but Caro took over.

"There's no maid here. Sarah is our nanny, she raised us! She takes care of the house but not at personal level. Neither Chris nor I have any right to order her around, but if it's so hard for you, there's Maria, she can take care of your needs" Caro said. She was a very fierce young woman, always just and stood up for her principles. She was a true reflection of Mr. James Ashton, and as her father he knew she would make a perfect lawyer. Abigail felt small, she didn't appreciate Caro's behavior at all, on the contrary, she felt humiliated. After a long sigh of frustration she stared at them one last time and left. As if nothing had happened, Caro snapped; "Did something happen? Why the long face nanny?"

"That wasn't nice child, you didn't have to take my side.

It was just a glass of milk" Sarah said, her arms acrossed against her chest.

"I wasn't taking sides, I just want her to respect you. To me you're like a mother. . and speaking of which, can I get my stuff?" A smile illuminated Carolyn's face, and with that, no one could resist smiling back. Even Hanna who was quietly observing the scene. "Oh, you must be Hanna right? Hi and welcome to Lycos!"

"Uh--thanks" Hanna replied.

"Hah. I don't know what to do with you. Here is your stuff, I guess you are skipping breakfast again!" Sarah asked.

"Yeah, with these potato chips, who cares about breakfast. . . but whatever that's smelling right now, save some for me, I better leave before her Majesty wakes up. Thanks nanny, bye Hanna!"

"Bye"

"Take care child"

"Mmh, don't you think you're being too much mother? I'm here you know. Someone might think she's your daughter and I'm not!" Hanna snapped, pretending to sulk.

"Can you blame me?" She raised a mocking eyebrow while preparing some coffee.

"Well alright! I admit she's really nice. Although I can't say the same about that Abbie girl. I can only smell trouble."

"You better stay away Hanna. I don't want any problem with Mrs. Theresa!"

"Relax mom, I'm just saying. Well, I'm going for a jogging. Can you keep an eye on those muffins?"

"Okay. But remember don't. . . "

"Make any trouble? I got it mom, please!"

Once Hanna left, some piece was restored in the kitchen; The way Sarah liked to keep her little sanctuary. For her that place meant a lot, she practically shared some beautiful memories with all other employees who would gather for meals with a little juicy neighbourhood-gossip. She took a long sigh while gazing around as if she was searching for a missing piece until Chris bursted in.

"Slept well nanny?" He asked her with a kiss on her cheek.

"Yes son. How are you this morning?"

"Great. I'm going to exercise a little, it's been a while

and plus those stuffs you feed us, I'm afraid I've gained few extra pounds!" He cracked a joke that lightened Sarah's face immediately. She was very fond of those kids.

"Oh stop it Chris. You look very handsome as you are!"

"But it's never bad to be cautious. . . See you later nanny!" He rushed out and left her to the same spot. Her mind quickly recalled that Hanna had also gone to exercise. *I just hope those two won't end up fighting again*, she thought.

OUTSIDE the morning air was soothing, and considering the tall trees surrounding their fancy neighborhood, everything about it felt pleasant to the eyes. Hanna decided to take advantage of nature to have a round or two of jogging alongside the road that led to the small lake. Amidst all that, she felt a presence of someone from behind. She slowed down a bit and turned back just to find Chris almost catching up. *What's with this jerk now*, she wondered while staring at him.

"What is this, are you stalking me now?" She snapped, mockingly.

Chris put his earphones off; "Hah. As if you own this

road! Do I have to remind you that you're now in my property young lady?" He also replied in the same tone of voice, still running at the same pace until Hanna started running faster just to overtake him.

"Your property my butt! I don't see your name engraved on this land, trees whatsoever!" She snapped, like two kids, he started running even faster and left her behind. Once again, they ended up in a crazy duel, bickering and running like contenders.

CHAPTER 3

After a whole long lapse to the small lake, they both collapsed on the green grass, gasping for some air. It wasn't easy running and talking at the same time especially in a competition mode. Their issue was yet to be resolved, but neither of the two seemed ready to compromise. Luckily, Chris acted as the bigger person and decided to break the ice.

"Look . . . Hanna, right?" He snapped, while catching a breath, his tilted head faced her as they lied flat on the lawn. "I'm sorry about yesterday, I realize that it could've been my mistake; Can we forget about it and start over?"

His sudden apology stunned Hanna, she'd never expected it. She eyed him suspiciously for a moment before raising her torso, she sat up and replied, "Well, It's okay. . . I also apologize, it wasn't entirely your fault!" She said with a flustered look, Chris smiled. " So, are we cool now?" She extended a hand towards him. He released a heavy sigh and responded with a nod after sitting up, both drenched in sweat.

Some minutes later, they were chatting while doing few workouts.

"And that's the last house on this side, it's been vacant

for over eight years now. Going farther means you enter the woods" he told her about the abandoned house at the end, her curious eyes kept scanning the surroundings that evidently captured her attention.

"Really? No wonder it's too quiet! But I like this place, as calm as it may be. . . it has it's charm" she replied, her body in stretching moves.

"It's either you're peculiar or too adventurous. No girl in their right mind would love this place, in fact no one comes here. Except for wood hikers once in a while!"

"But you just said you used to play in that house, I mean before your friend's family moved."

"That was like some years ago, by now, it must be more of a haunted house!"

"Oh yeah? Sounds tempting to me. Don't you wanna go back there" she glared at him, a mischief spark painting her puppy eyes.

"Huh? You're really something else. Now, let's go back home!" He breathed out then threw a last glance at the small white house across the road. It's been so long since he last set foot in there, it contained loads of good memories with his childhood friend, John whose family suddenly disappeared one day without a word. In some

ways, it was something that kept bothering him, and made him scared to make new friends.

"Um--chris? Can you give me a tour around the campus, I always find the orientation week boring." She demanded out of nowhere.

"Sure. How about today? I don't have much to do" Chris suggested.

"Really? Thanks. That was easy, I'm stunned"

"Why? Did you think I'm all grumpy like you?"

"Did you just call me grumpy? Hey you. . ." she tried to hit him but he slipped and ended up chasing after him while sharing a laugh.

A couple of hours later, Chris was heading outside the house for some air when he spotted his mother together with Abbie at the garden pavilion. They seemed so friendly and it was quite a rare scene to find someone pleasing when comes to Theresa Ashton. He slowly paced towards them and said hi.

"I'm glad you're here Chris, how can you allow those kitchen servants to gang up against Abbie, huh? Can you believe what they did to her? And on top of all, my own

daughter kept defending those--those people" she barked.

"Aunt it's okay, I think I was wrong. I'm too used to the way things run at home and I forgot that I'm somewhere else" Abbie jumped in, for a second Chris inspected her silently.

"Oh, look how sweet she is. But of course that's how things work, I spend a fortune of those maids. I want you to feel at home dear, so from now on I won't be lenient with those low-lives. Rest assured!" Theresa added, a stern look on her perfectly contoured face.

"Mom is right, this is now your home. We'll make sure you get everything you need. . .and I apologize if you felt offended this morning" Chris said, while staring at Abbie's reassured face. She was pleased to hear that, coming from Chris "But there's just one thing you should be aware of, Sarah is not just an employee of this house, and more than anyone else it's your mother who should know this well" he shifted his gaze towards Theresa.

"Ugh. . .That's all I needed!" Theresa hummed, "Okay, forget about that. Abbie wants to do some shopping, so you should drive her since you seem to have nothing better to do" she told Chris, He tried to argue but hesitated once his eyes met Abbie's.

"Okay!" He replied shortly just to realize that he'd already made plans with Hanna, and there was no way to back out Abbie's. He ran a hand on his hair but held his tongue as the girl stood up with a smile and went to get ready.

Minutes later he was driving quietly when she broke the silence. "I'm really sorry Chris, but I need all the things for school by today. If I knew this place, I would've gone by myself"

"It's no bother, don't worry!" He prompted, and they shared a smile. "By the way, why did you choose Lycos? You could've stayed in SA for college I suppose!" He decided to make a conversation and luckily the girl was up for it.

"What can I say, maybe I needed a change of scenery. Don't get me wrong, I love Johannesburg. . .I just wanted to stay away for a while" she kept telling him while making few comments about Lycos. "I heard you're in fourth year, right?"

"Yes, I'm a senior now! Too bad I won't witness your dramatic sophomore!" He teased her, it made her blush a little.

"Come on, why would it be dramatic?"

"I don't know, plenty of things happen during that time. Perhaps a time to find yourself?"

"So, did you find yourself?" She asked, curiosity all over her charming eyes.

"Um. . . yes and no. At least I realized that I truly love business management instead of politics as my mother wanted!" He replied.

"How cool! I'm also thinking of taking the same major"

"Oh, welcome on board then!"

The whole ride was full of stories to tell until they realized that they were right in front of a big mall.

MEANWHILE, Hanna took a stroll inside the mansion hoping to find Chris for their agreed schedule. She found Maria at the living room and asked if she'd seen him, but Theresa bursted in before any response and questioned about her identity while scrolling her as if she was someone from the Amazon.

"I--I'm Hanna, Sarah's daughter!" She replied, slightly nervous. If eyes could kill then she would've died from Theresa's glance.

"Sarah's? So she does have a daughter after all. . . and how do you know Chris?" Theresa asked, she was pacing around Hanna slowly and made her swallow hard.

"I met him when I-- " Hanna wanted to give her details when she recalled the warning from Chris about the airport incident, after a small pause she continued "this morning, during workout! I wanted to ask him something about college!"

"Mmm. . . about college? So, you're also going to the same college! It's strange huh?"

"What is?"

"The fact that anyone can join college nowadays!" She snapped, the sarcasm in her tone started to upset Hanna.

"Yes. As long as one has what it takes!" She replied. Maria was almost trembling while witnessing the drama. On one hand, she wanted to warn Hanna of the way she spoke to Theresa, and on the other she couldn't say a word in front of her boss.

A short silence reigned for a minute, Theresa's eyes fixed on Hanna who seemed unshaken. And then she bursted out laughing before stepping right in front of her.

"Where are you coming from again?" She asked Hanna.

"Sydney, Australia!" She answered, with confidence. Theresa looked intrigued but she was able to maintain her composure.

"My son is not home, and I don't think he'll be back soon considering his companion!" She blended it to her face, as if she was delivering a certain message. "MARIA! Back to work, I want the stairs to be shiny!" She suddenly turned to Maria with her killer gaze.

"Right away ma'am!" Maria replied and run off. Theresa planted a fake smile as her gaze shifted back to Hanna before walking away and left her completely dejected, a frustration sigh escaped her lungs

"That damn Chris lied to me!" she thought out loudly as she left the house.

* * * *

Chris and Abbie returned home past dinner time, from the smile on their faces, it proved they'd had a great time. The moon was crescent, so despite the broken light at the parking area, the brightness was adequate. Abbie was carrying her shopping bags as Chris locked the car.

"I can't believe you made me ruin my diet Chris, I nearly

finished the whole chicken" Abbie said while giggling at the laughing Chris.

"Hey, you gotta loosen up sometimes. . . I don't understand why women are so obsessed with dieting!" He replied, then leaned against his car-side.

"I'd rather starve to death than getting fat, so just leave it!. . . By the way, thank you Chris, today was really fun!" Her tone changed to a calm and soothing one, as her eyes pierced intensely into his for a long while. She slowly closed the distance between them.

"Um. . . it's my pleasure! I mean--I also had--" he found himself striving for words, as his mind got busy decoding Abbie's weird gestures as if she was about to do the forbidden. She seized the chance to lay a soft kiss on his lips.

"Good night!" She whispered and walked away, leaving him all distraught. He straightened up and touched his lips as if to make sure that something did touch them. And all of a sudden a familiar voice snapped at him.

"How wonderful! I think your day was very productive brother!" It was Carolyn coming from behind, dressed in pyjamas.

"Oh God, you startled me. What are you doing here

Caro?" He gasped.

"Nothing. I was just waiting for a call and lucky me, I got to see an adult rated movie right outside my house! aren't you two moving too fast?"

"Oh please stop exaggerating, if you saw correctly she was the one who kissed me. So if you'll excuse me, I'll go in first!"

"You're right I guess. I think our guest is more cunning than I thought!" She said sarcastically, and added, "don't you think you owe someone an apology though? I heard you stood up the other girl"

"Oh. Right. Hanna. . .I'll go see her right now." He replied and left.

There was an out house for the employees and that's where Hanna stayed. Chris knocked the door and fortunately, Hanna herself opened. She looked surprised at first but kept her usual face.

"Hey, what are you doing here? It's past working hours!" She sounded very specific that it made Chris even more unease. He was fumbling, while looking very apologetic.

"No, it's not that!" He replied quickly. "I-- I wanted to say sorry. I know I stood you up but I swear it wasn't intentional at all"

Hanna narrowed her eyes as if she couldn't follow what he was saying but immediately caught on. "Oh, that! Don't worry, I assumed you had something important so well, it's all cool"

"Really?"

"Sure!"

"Okay! good night I guess?" He said, still unsure of himself. Hanna nodded her head and Chris turned around, but then returned back to her as she was still standing by the door. "Are you always this unpredictable?" He asked, his tone amidst anger and disappointment from her indifference.

She seemed shocked, "Me? What are you talking about?"

"I mean, I thought you might be mad and throw a punch or something! I honestly wish you'd done that!" He snapped with his fidgeting voice.

Hanna chuckled and asked, "Do you think I'm a savage? I'm human too Chris, I can also be understanding! Why? Are you feeling guilty?" This time she moved closer to his face.

"Yes. I feel guilty!" He replied like a small boy. His reaction made her step back a little, an amused smile on

her face.

"Okay. Why don't you make it up to me in another way?" She proposed, while moving closer to him. Instinctively, he tilted his head back defensively and cause a huge laugh from Hanna. "Relax! I won't satisfy your rotten mind. Like I said, I'm not a savage! So how about you give me a tour around the city instead?" She resumed her position and made Chris laugh back.

"Fine. Oh, I think it's a great idea coz tomorrow there's an open-market, it's like a country fair except there won't be bulls and horses!" He said, suggestively. "But there'll be plenty of interesting things. . . If your'e you up for it of course"

"Sounds like a plan to me! I've always wanted to see the country fair!"

"Good, See you tomorrow then!" Chris said, "Oh, I said it's like, a country fair! Not an actual country fair. . ."

They shared a laugh.

"Fine I get it!"

"Perfect! Good night Hanna!"

"Good night Chris!"

After his departure, Hanna returned in and closed the

door; when she bumped into her mother.

"Was that Chris?" Sarah asked, her face was covered with seriousness.

"You scared me mom! Well, yes it was him. Why? Is there any problem?" Hanna asked her worriedly.

"No it's nothing. Go in and sleep!" She replied and walked to their kitchen without another word. Her daughter found her behavior rather peculiar but decided to ignore.

On Saturday, the following morning they were all ready to hit the festivities when the two siblings marched out together. Chris was dressed casually but in a fancy way and so did Caro. As usual, Hanna was in her tomboy attire except the girly T-shirt she was wearing.

"Wow. I love your mixology!" Caro snapped at Hanna, a genuine smile across her tiny lips.

"Thanks. . .I guess?" Hanna quipped, skeptically.

"I hope we're ready. Oh, actually this is my sister Carolyn and she's joining us!" Chris introduced them but in return he found Caro rolling her eyes and Hanna laughing. "Did I say something funny?" He asked,

bewildered.

"No. It's just. . .we've already met. Plus, I think it's gonna be fun. The more the merrier!" Hanna told him.

"Oh dear, be careful of what you're wishing for--the ancient phrase says" Caro said audibly as her eyes directed to the side where Abbie was emerging. They all realized her point.

"Hey guys, can I join too? I don't have anything to do here!" Abbie asked, with her sweet alluring voice.

Chris exchanged glances with the rest and answered her. "No problem! Shall we go now?"

"Wait! I'll go and change first. I won't take long I promise!" She snapped and run off. They could only hear Carolyn's sarcastic chuckle.

"Oh the princess has to change her pretty little gown, Gosh! Can someone tell her that we're only going for a stroll? And not a ball?" Caro snapped, all four eyes were fixed on her,before everyone started laughing loudly.

CHAPTER 4

Days passed, and even weeks. Hanna settled herself with her new life; school, homework and assignment became part of her. Everything worked perfectly fine, and her friendship with Chris Ashton grew even deeper. Between Hanna and Abbie, there was always an unbearable tension, and they both understood that they couldn't stand one another. On top of everything, Hanna tried her level best to avoid Theresa since she'd specifically showed that she had no good opinion of her.

One Saturday morning, after a long hectic week, Hanna got up early as usual and head out for a jog when she met Chris on the way. This time the encounter felt pleasant.

"Hey there! Are you ready to get kicked?" She taunted him, playfully.

"I think you mean I, kicking you, no?" He knocked her out with a bashful smirk before running off.

"That's not fair Chris! I didn't hear a cue"

"You never set any rule as far as I remember madam!"

"Oh yeah? I'm gonna get you!"

"And you're going down little Missy!"

They halted at the usual spot, by the lake. "Umph! I thought we'd never make it!"

"Speak for yourself lazy bum, I can take another round just so you know" Chris snapped, just to annoy her while stretching up. But she was strangely silent, her eyes fixing that house.

"Don't you feel a strange connection to that house? Kind like, it's calling you to go in?" Hanna said, mimicking a weird serious tone that almost had him. He raised an ambiguity eyebrow while staring at her. "That's it, I'm going!" She stood up ready to leave.

"Are you crazy? What will you do when you get there?" He asked, his hand on her wrist.

"I don't know, I'm just curious to see the inside. Wanna come?" She smiled broadly, she had a wild adventurous spirit as Chris usually told her. He remained indecisive for a minute and eventually ended up following her.

They found a big lock at the gate which made Chris shrug as if saying I told you. To his surprise, Hanna started climbing up the gate and in a second she was already in.

"What are you doing Hanna?" He urged, bewildered.

"Did! because I'm already in!" She replied, while smiling cornily. "What are you waiting for, jump in" She ordered. He looked around, then followed hesitantly, with utmost care so as to never miss a step.

"I don't believe this! Don't you know trespassing is illegal?" He snapped once he stepped down.

"I do. . .but isn't it what makes it more interesting? Besides, I've got you, the Justice minister's son to back me up, let's go partner!" Hanna's enthusiasm left him speechless.

He sighed and started cruising around for almost a minute. A bunch of memories flashed back; he could see his little version roaming around that tiny yard with his buddy, John who used to enjoy collecting bugs. They were inseparable. Suddenly, Hanna's scream from inside brought him back to earth and he rushed over.

"What's wrong? Why are you screaming?" He found her on her knees, hiding her face away. When he looked up, he spotted a huge spider on it's web. He broke into a long laugh. She immediately got up, annoyed.

"I wasn't scared you know. I just fell off!" She defended herself.

"Yeah. Right. Do I look that dumb to you Ms. I'm-not-

scared-of-anything!" He teased her while clearing the path.

"Shh. . .over there Chris, haven't you seen a shadow passing by!" It was Hanna's turn to mess with him. She clutched his arm, pretending to be frightened.

"No, no please stop that. You know i hate ghost stories and I definately hate ghosts" he replied,looking a bit weary. His reaction made her giggle.

The house was a mess, few furniture that were quite dusty and some old books on the shelf. Chris reached for the books, and found the familiar comic one.

"Have you found something?" Hanna asked him, curiously. He nodded his head and showed her the book.

"I gave it to John on his birthday" He let out a faint smile as they both took a seat on the table after unwrapping it's plastic cover.

Hanna gave her a minute to reminisce and asked, "Then why did he leave it behind?"

"I don't know. Maybe he wanted nothing to do with me anymore, he wanted to detach himself from these--these stupid memories!" He said bitterly. It was Hanna's first time seeing him so vulnerable.

"Is that how crooked your smart mind works Mr. Ashton?" Hanna demanded, her tone washed away his pensive look, "What if it's the other way around? Maybe he wanted you to remember him through that, or he just forgot to pick it before leaving. Just keep the book and stop imagining things!"

He stared at her intensely, and they shared a smile. But he then added, "I'm just concerned about one thing, why did they suddenly leave? And that without saying goodbye? What could've happened?" His gaze was still on Hanna.

"I wish I could give you the answer, but you know it's totally impossible!" She replied.

They spent the next few minutes looking around and decided to leave.

Once outside, Chris asked her; "How comes you're so natural in jumping fences? Could it be you're a thief?"

"Yes. And ex-convict too" She replied sarcastically. He laughed heartily. "What? I might as well show you a dragon tattoo on my back!"

"You have one?"

"No! Are you stupid or pretending to be one?"

"Okay I get it! You were being sarcastic!" He grinned. It was always a pleasure seeing Hanna's outbursts whenever he teased her.

"I remember trying to steal twice, but I got caught in both occasions because I couldn't face my aunt in the eyes"

"Really? And what exactly?"

"Pastries in her bakery!"

"What? Pastries? I thought some money or jewelry"

"Hey, my aunt's baking skills are extraordinary. Besides, I respect other people's money coz I know how hard it is, to earn some. . . and I don't wear jewelries"

WHEN Chris returned home an hour later, he surprisedly found Theresa inside his bedroom.

"Mom? What are you doing here?" He asked without taking a step from the door

"Waiting for my son, of course! . . . Since you're too busy with your so called friend, that you completely forgot about me, I figured I should be the one to visit you!" She

said with a serious tone of voice. Chris sighed and pulled a chair across the bed, then held Theresa's hands.

"Aren't you exaggerating a little Ms. Theresa?" He started sweet-talking her. "It's not true. You know I've been busy with classes, thesis and bunch of other stuff's. But don't worry, I'll make it up to you! I promise" he managed to make her smile.

"Okay son, but one more thing, that girl. . .what's her name again--Hanna!" She snapped. "Are you sure there's nothing more between you?" The question seemed to annoy Chris, he stood up and run a hand on his face.

"Again with that mom? Hanna is just a friend! I told you once and I'm repeating again. Okay, suppose it's more than friends, what would you do?" For once he decided to be less-subtle about the issue.

"Everything! I would NEVER let that thing be part of our life. NEVER! And don't even think about starting something with her Chris Ashton! Or else, you won't even keep her as a friend!" She exploded with anger. For a moment Chris's eyes were wide open, in shock.

"Mom? Are you even listening to your self? What has she ever done for you to hate her like that" He looked her in the eyes, unable to understand her reasoning.

"Hate her? I despise her. Consider yourself warned!" She said. "Chris, don't force me to be a bad mother!" She rose up, threw him a cold gaze and then stormed off, leaving him completely lost.

Perplexed, he dropped on the bed, a million thoughts in his mind when his door swung open again. Caro peeked her head. "What? Have you also come to lecture me about Hanna? or question our friendship?" He snapped at her.

"Hey, take it easy bro! I just wanted a charger, I can't find mine. Did something happen?" Carolyn asked, with much concerns as she walked in.

"I'm sorry Caro, I just had a one-on-one with mom!" He picked the charger from the circuit and gave her, then filled her in. She was also surprised.

"Oh, that's not a good sign. But really Chris, I don't mean to pry, is she just a friend? I mean, it's been more than a month since she came here and you two became inseparable!"

"Oh please, not you too! Can't two people be best buddies without romance involved?"

"Well you'll have to forgive me, but those two people happen to be of opposite sex, not all of us have boys for

best friend! You know how this place is. . .it's like only cavemen live here" she said in such a way that they found themselves laughing out loudly. "Okay, forget about Hanna. What about Abbie? For the record, I caught you two kissing twice. What do I make out of it?"

"Look Caro, I won't deny, Abbie is pretty and too straightforward! I don't know if I like her or not so we agreed to take things casual and see what happens, and point of correction-- she kissed me, I didn't!"

"Oh come on! Now you sound like a jerk! I'm off" She walked to the door, then paused and looked back, "I just hope you won't mess anything up Chris, I can tell how hard dealing with Abbie can be. Plus, she's Mom's favourite toy!" Her cold tone left him with a lot to think of.

* * * *

Weeks flew by very quickly, at last the first semester was over. It was the last day of exams and just after Hanna submitted her paper she found Chris outside the auditorium. She rushed over and slipped her arm to his neck on attempt to startle him.

"What's up Ashton? Did you wait long?" She grinned, obviously glad to see him.

"Hey, how was the exam?" He asked after dropping his headphones off. She slowly took a seat across him, a skeptical look in her eyes for a second, but then the assuring grin appeared.

"Well. . . it was okay. With a genius tutor like you, I hit those calculus like hell. So it was worth staying up fortnight!"

"Oh, I'm glad. Because I was beginning to wonder what's filled in that dumb head of yours"

"I'm not dumb!" She pretended to sulk, and Chris poked her forehead. "Ouch! I guess I'll be dumb to ask how yours ended since you're too smart to say the least. Shall we go and eat now? I'm famished!"

"I was wondering when you're going to say that. Here, I brought your favourite burger and fresh lemonade!" He handed her the parcel.

"Wow Ashton! How thoughtful! Thank you" she pecked him on the cheek before heading to the car.

"Always on time!" He grinned, proudly.

Some minutes later;

"Chris?" She suddenly called him as they rode back

home.

"Yes?" He replied, his eyes fixed on the road.

"I'm going to Australia in two days!"

"What? And you're just telling me now?"

"Hey, hear me out first! I swear I only thought of this yesterday. I miss my Aunt, We've never been apart this long. You understand me, right?" She tried to be serious as she could be.

He released a long sigh and said, "I do. But what's the hurry? Can't you stay a week before going?"

"That's precisely the problem. It's going to be her birthday next week, Victor and I promised to throw her a party this year."

"I get it!" He replied, there was still a furrow between his eyebrows. Surprisingly, Hanna started laughing. He stared at her shockingly and asked, "Why are you laughing?"

"Nothing. Well, you just sounded like I'm never coming back, I'm only staying for a week or two. Besides, it's not like you'll miss me or something, no?"

"No. The only thing I'll miss is making fun of your ugly face and dumb head!"

"Alright. Take it easy, why are you getting mad at me?" She eyed him, bewildered. He just sniffed and kept quiet. "Will you take me to the airport? friend?" She teased him, trying to reduce the tension. Apparently, Chris didn't seem to like the news at all

"Of course! Do I have a choice?"

"No?"

"Fine! I'll take you. Happy?"

"More than happy!"

Few days later Abbie flew back to South Africa, at last the house was back to how it was before. Theresa had lost her great companion and to refill the gap, she started attending her social gathering with other high society ladies and for a while there was some tranquility in Ashton's residency.

For Chris, things weren't the same. He obviously grew fond of his best friend. Luckily, he was busy with the internship he got in one of the commercial companies where he spent most of his time. He never stopped video chatting with Hanna and Abbie at times. Without knowing, the three weeks faded in a blink of an eye.

ONE morning, as Chris was getting ready to leave, Carolyn approached him and asked;

"Is Hanna returning today?"

"Yes, with a morning flight. In fact, I'm heading to the airport right away!" He replied, with much enthusiasm.

"Aww look at you, if someone sees you might think you're going to meet your girlfriend!"

"Carolyn!"

"Okay, I'll keep quiet! Can I tag along?"

"No problem"

A while later, they were waiting for her when they suddenly heard a familiar voice calling their name in the middle of the crowd.

"Chris! Caro! Over here. . ." Hanna shouted while waving with joy.

"Oh no! This is so embarrassing! Can't she just come without making a scene?" Caro snapped, trying to hide her face as people around stared at them. On other hand, Chris was laughing.

"Are you forgetting it's Hanna? Always making a dramatic entrance" he said while waving back at her.

They both paced towards her when she quickly jumped over to hug Chris, she pulled a very long embrace that left Caro agape.

"Okay. This is officially disturbing! Why don't you just date already? Seriously, just quit that friend charade!" Caro said but it was as if she was talking to herself! "Hello? I'm right here!" She clapped her hands and the two laughed before pulling apart.

"I miss you too Caro!" Hanna hugged her and they all smiled. "I'm so happy to see you both! I thought the plane wouldn't take off!"

"And so we are. But I think someone has surpassed us all!" Caro said while staring at her brother, provokingly.

"I think what Caro means is that we should probably get going, right Caro?" He signalled to her for a back up but she shrugged instead. Unable to contain his joy, Chris added. "I'm sure you must be hungry by now. Why don't we go and eat something?"

"Yeah. Right. Because you think I'm a pig who only thinks of food?" Annoyed, Hanna replied. Her reaction made the two siblings laugh heartily.

"Hey, I'm sorry. It's not my fault that all the girls I know have got a huge appetite, well, except Abigail who

constantly watches her figure. But you, Caro. . . I don't need to say much, do I? "He laughed, hilariously as the girls exchanged a disdainful look. "So, let's go. And EAT!" He snapped with a satisfied grin and made a way.

They returned to the mansion early at night, and Hanna was surprised that the house was so quite. Caro bid her goodnight and retired first, leaving them outside Hanna's place.

"Hey, thank you for picking me up. Are you sure you don't want to come in?" She asked him.

"No, you should get some rest. Oh before I forget. . . take this" he handed her a single key but she couldn't get what for. "It's the key for that house. . .You know, that house!" He tried to explain subtly and she immediately caught on.

"That house? But how--" She snapped, stunningly. He smiled warmly, both hands in his pockets and told her that he'd duplicated the lock and cleaned that place up. He wanted to keep his childhood memories intact. "So, I can use that place when I want to escape a bad day?" She looked at him mischievously.

"More or less! I figured you were having hard time

studying in here since it's a sharing house. Just make sure no one sees you. Got it?"

"Yes sir! Oh thank you so much!" Subconsciously, she found herself wrapping him into a tight embrace. But something wasn't right, as if her body was reacting in some strange way. Same as at the airport; at least by then she convinced herself that it was a longing effect. But at that moment, she realized it wasn't, it's like she never wanted to let go. She immediately let go, her cheeks flushed red.

"Is something wrong?" Chris questioned her, worriedly.

"No! Goodnight Chris"

"Ah, you too" And with that, she rushed in without looking back.

CHAPTER 5

A weird wave of emotions started to overwhelm Hanna. Her feelings were almost out of proportion; every time she saw Chris with Abbie, her heart shattered. She could no longer see him as just a friend; and she hated the feeling.

Several weeks went by since they returned back to school. By then, Chris was a bit busier than before. Sometimes he'd spent nights with his classmates in their place, studying, which made Hanna miss him even more.

It was Friday evening, when Hanna heard Christian's voice talking to someone, right from her room. A pleasant smile stretched her lips. She tossed the book aside and rushed outside, to at least see him after two days of being out of reach. As if the destiny wasn't on her side, she emerged to the front yard and tried to call after him when Abigail appeared, a huge smile on her face. She practically run towards him and planted a kiss on his lips. Chris somehow seemed uncomfortable with the gesture as he slightly pushed her away.

"Hey, we're home and anyone can see us!" He told her while looking around.

"Come on! No one's here" she insisted. " I can't believe

you came!"

"You said it was urgent. . . plus, I'm done with the project so here I am"

"Oh, does this mean you're not going back to your study buddies?" She leaned closer to him, playfully as they head to the house. At the moment Hanna was peeking from a distance, blood boiling with anger, fists clenched and still she didn't dare to show herself up. Not for too long until Maria blew off her cover by calling her name out loudly. Hanna turned back and saw her approaching.

"What are you doing here?" Maria snapped, holding a bucket full of dry towels.

"Shhh. . . Can you stop shouting and mind your business Maria?" Hanna asked her in a low voice.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude!" She replied. Hanna growled, then rolled her eyes before Maria left quietly. *That's all I needed*, she thought and at that very same moment Chris appeared.

"So I was right. . .it's you! Hi?" He greeted her warmly.

"Oh, hi Chris?" She tried to hide her gloominess with a half-charming face.

"Hey, what's with your reaction? Did you miss that

much?" Chris asked in a cheesy way, then cupped her face with his palms. His mere touch was by then enough to charge up her body, she felt a current running her veins as their skin touched. She quickly broke free.

"No. I didn't! Am not a kid! Stop touching my face?" She snapped, completely annoyed after pulling away. Chris was surprised but he bursted out laughing.

"What is this now? Are you mad because I couldn't answer your texts? Well I'm sorry"

"Not at all. You think you're the centre of the universe? that everything I feel has to do with you?"

"Alright. Now I'm officially confused. Where is this all coming from, huh?" He asked, seriously this time. Before Hanna could answer, another voice stepped in.

"I think what she means is, you should stop treating her like a little girl. Right Hanna?" Abbie snapped, a plastic smile on her face, before wrapping her arms around Chris's waist, as if she was marking her territory. Hanna's glare was right on it, and couldnt contain the jelousy. Luckily, Chris wasn't too compelling as he slowly removed Abbie's arms before his phone buzzed like his personal saint.

"It's my mother!" Said he, haltingly. "I'll see you later

Hanna. . . when you're feeling better!" He said knowingly. Obviously, he didn't pay attention to Abbie's theory. He knew his friend better to notice that something wasn't okay. He left the girls alone and walked away.

Once he disappeared, Hanna glared at Abbie whose piercing gaze was fiercely focused on her.

"What?" Hanna asked.

"Do you have to make it that obvious?" Abigail stepped closer, arms folded across her chest. For a moment Hanna seemed clueless, as if she understood nothing at all. "Oh please! Quit the innocent act, you know exactly what I'm talking about. You can fool everyone else, for all I care, but I know that you--are in love with him" she finally snapped it.

This time there was unreadable expression on Hanna's face. She swallowed hard, eyes wide open. "I don't know what you're talking about, and definitely whom you're talking about. Unlike you, I have better things to do. . . if you'll excuse me!" Hanna snorted, determined to keep her cool.

"CHRIS!" Abbie raised sharply. With that Hanna couldn't make another step, she stood still. Anyone could see through her nervous expression as Abbie paced right in

front of her. "I always knew you were after him. . .with this best friend facade! Well, it's OK. Who wouldn't? After all he's a quite a good catch. Smart, handsome and RICH! Isn't he the most attractive package?" She leaned over and whispered the last sentence, with a cunning raised eyebrow.

"Will you please stop making things up! That's a lie, Chris is only a friend to me, So I--"

"Oh is he? You know, I've heard that story too many times. But it doesn't mean I believe it, I'm not dumb! The only thing I want you to know is that, don't make it obvious. . .Can you imagine what'd happen if he finds out? You gonna lose him. . .Wanna bet?" There was a weird silence after shooting such question. Hanna was cornered. She tried so hard to hide her feelings and in an instant she realized it was no longer a secret. She couldn't bring herself to argue with her.

"Are you done?" With a deep and yet defeated voice, she uttered.

"I guess. That's all. Or, maybe not" she smirked, while trailing her eyes playfully. "Just on more thing, can you please stop throwing those jealous tantrum? They're really beginning to get on my nerves!" She reckoned before leaving triumphantly.

When alone, Hanna leaned back against the wall, her body trembling with both anger and fear. Every word kept echoing inside her ears. *Now what God?*, she thought while placing a hand on her pounding heart.

EXACTLY as Abbie's smart head predicted, Hanna fell right into her trap. She very well knew her opponent's weakness and strategically used it to her advantage. Hanna started avoiding Chris, she made it possible to stay away from him for the time being, hoping to finally bury the feelings she had for him. Which in reality was far from being possible. After a long week of hide and seek, Chris managed to catch her around campus. She had to play nice and show him how apologetic she felt for not being around him as they usually did. But when he asked her to join him for lunch, she turned him down, with an excuse of going to the library for the assignment.

"Again? Really Hanna, what's going on with you? I'm starting to think you're avoiding me!" He barked, feeling both furious and disappointed. "It's about a third time you're giving me the same excuse this week. . .have I done something wrong? Talk to me damn it!"

"Chris no! I'm not avoiding you, I swear" she replied, her

hands on his shoulder with a guilty expression. He sighed, his hazel eyes deeply on hers. Hanna started fidgeting, unable to lie to him any further. "Okay! You're right. I am avoiding you"

"What? Why?" He glared down on her, with ambiguity.

"Well the thing is, It's Abbie. She thinks I'm--"

"Abbie! Abbie! Abbie! It's always about Abbie! Look Hanna, I understand you two don't get along, but does it have to go this far? Getting in the way of our friendship and all?" He asked. Hanna was just glaring at him, as if she wanted to scream to his face that she wanted him for herself. "Fine. I'm going to end things with her. . .if that's what you want" he declared.

"And why would you do that?"

"Perhaps it's the only way to show how important you are to me. You're my friend Hanna, maybe the only true friend I've ever had. So please don't do this to me!"

Oh, a friend! I see. How touching, she thought. "If you expect me to say thank you, then you're totally wrong about me Chris. I don't know how serious your relationship with Abbie is, but I'll never be a reason for your break-up".

Her reaction stunned Chris even more. "There we go

again. I'm always the bad guy, I can't believe we're back to square one. Exactly as the day we met, you're just so hard to understand damn it! So then, what do you want me to do?" With his teeth clenched, he lunged towards her.

"Nothing!" Hanna replied, fiercely and turned her toes.

"Okay. I'll just stop bother myself with you. I'm so tired of this stupid game!" He shouted, angrily as she kept walking. "I really don't understand women!" He muttered to himself.

Startingly, another female-voice replied to his remark. "Unfortunately no one does. . . If there was one, he'd have surely conquered the universe by now!"

"Caro? How long have you been listening?" He asked as soon as he saw Carolyn approaching.

"Long enough to witness the misfortune of the best couple in Lycos!" She replied, with her usual sarcastic air, a little smile on her natural-beauty face. Chris's eyes narrowed. "Oops! My bad! I mean, best friends in Lycos!" She smiled widely at his so-predictable reaction.

He sighed deeply and asked, "What could be wrong with her?"

She shrugged. "If you don't know, then how would I? . . .

but then again, some secrets are better remain untold!" She said, thoughtfully.

"Secrets? What does that mean?"

"Nothing. Just a line I picked from the novel I'm reading. Were you heading for lunch? I can do you the honors if you want?"

"Yeah. Whatever!"

The following few days weren't as good as normal. Chris decided to be cold and try moving on without Hanna, and she did exactly the same. It was a bit of a habit, that whenever they had a fight, He would be the one to initiate piece but things weren't as that at that moment. He swore to never talk to her again. They kept ignoring each other for several days, and it was possible because he decided to spend most of his time outdoors.

On Saturday morning, after a solo jogging session, Hanna was staring at her cellphone with Chris's contact on the screen. She'd hoped to at least see him for their usual workout routine but he didn't show up. She was tense, sad and regretful at the same time, and still her egocentric nature didn't allow her to dial a number. She tossed the phone on bed and rushed out. She joined her

mother in the kitchen to help arranging flowers since Maria was busy with the dishes.

"I didn't realized you're so good with flowers" Sarah said after scrutinizing her daughter for a long while.

"Didn't I tell you she was so good the other day? Even Mrs. Theresa said they were lovely. Although I didn't mention that Hanna was the one who arranged them" Maria jumped in, with her cheerful persona.

"I'm glad you didn't mention my name, or else she'd have smashed the poor vase on the floor!" Hanna said and they all laughed. "Um--where is everyone? The house seems empty" Hanna asked.

"I don't know! Oh, I love when it's this peaceful, that's why I like it when the head of the house takes charge!" Sarah snapped enthusiastically.

"What is she blabbling about?" Hanna turned to Maria, and she only shrugged.

"If you're asking about Chris, he left early in the morning" Sarah told her, after resuming her serious face.

"Motheer!"

"What? Isn't he the one you're curious about? So, what are you fighting about this time?"

"Fight? What fight, I think I better go and well. . .finish my laundry?" Hanna was very flustered as she walked out of the kitchen, but her mother's gaze was as cold as an ice, as if she could see through her.

"Aw! Did you see how embarrassed she was? They must be having a lover's quarrel!" Maria jumped, excitedly.

"MARIA!" Sarah glared at her as she shuddered upon hearing her own name. "Be careful with your words! Now back to work!" She closed the subject and Maria nodded, nervously. *I just hope it's not what I'm thinking*, Sarah thought before exhaling audibly.

That afternoon, after spending few hours feeling restless, Hanna thought it was better to get out and gulp some fresh air. She just roamed around the mansion, since it was huge enough to get lost. The sun was beaming, but the ring of a fresh breeze from the trees made it worthy day-walking. She walked slowly, arms in her denim loose shorts while making regular sighs with her mind ablaze. Suddenly, all the chain emotions got cut off when she heard a sound coming from the hedges. She gazed over and saw unfamiliar middle-aged man on top of the ladder, staring down at the dropped scissors. It looked like he was pruning the fence. She rushed over and helped him.

"Thank you!" The man told her as soon as she handed him the tool.

"Don't mention. I've never seen you before, are you the new employee?" Hanna asked him before he carried on with his work.

He smiled warmly and replied, "Yes. And do you live here Young lady?" The man asked her, while looking at her this time.

"Yeah, my mother Sarah works here"

"You're Sarah's daughter?" He stared at Hanna, somehow surprised.

"Yes. You know my mother?"

"Um. . . I've had a pleasure of meeting her. She seems like a nice woman" he replied, while concentrated with his work, that he was so good at.

"Too good if you ask me" She tucked down on the grass as her companion laughed heartily after her remark. There was something familiar about the way he laughed that Hanna detected, even his looks. "Do you live around here? It's like I've seen you before!"

"Really? I don't think we've met before because I'm not from here"

"Oh, okay. Then why did you choose to work here?" She asked, but shortly regretted asking such an obvious when her eyes met his amused look, "Stupid question, isn't it? What's important is getting paid. I guess?" She wasn't sure herself if her words were convincing. Surprisingly, that man bursted out laughing.

"You don't think I should work here? Why?"

"No! I think you misunderstood me Sir. I--" she tried to make something up, but after seeing his raised eyebrow, she sighed. "Okay, I'll be very honest with you sir. It's not bad working here, they pay well, at least no one is complaining and people are nice here" she paused. By that time, that man was listening attentively. He even halted for a while.

"And? Because I can sense a but there, no?" He asked, knowingly, with a little smirk. He was quite enjoying the conversation.

Hanna nodded, agreeably. "But there's just one important detail. Don't mess with Mrs. Ashton! Stay away from her and you'll be safe"

"Oh really? Are you suggesting that she's a bad person, a bull or a tyrant?"

"No I didn't say that. Hold on, why are you twisting my

words? You sound like a politician" she snapped at him, and they both shared a laugh. "She's not a bad person. Just quite handy and too overprotective of what's hers"

"You're so right! I mean, you sound right" he replied and continued with the pruning.

For a moment Hanna disappeared and came back with a bottle of water and glass of fresh juice. "Ta-da! I didn't know what you'd prefer so I brought both. It's too hot, isn't it" she smiled as the man dismounted the ladder.

"Oh, how thoughtful of you. Thank you young lady! Sarah must be very proud of you" He regarded and gulped the water as they both sat down. "You seem very smart. You must be doing so well in class"

"Me? No I'm not, on the contrary. I don't even know what I'm doing in college. I suck in everything!" Hanna said, bitterly. Strangely, she found herself like she could open up to that stranger. She told him about her struggles academically and the way she felt about herself compared to other people her age, who seemed so certain with their career goals.

"Is that why you look so sad?" He asked her without making a comment on the subject.

Hanna run her palm on the face, "Do I look sad?" Her

cheesy reaction forced a smile out of him as he continued;

"Let me tell you this secret that I wish someone had told me before, back in my days" he said haltingly. "Don't feel depressed or intimidated by the kids your age who act like they have it all together, because in reality, none of them has it all figured out. Growth concept is broader than meets the eye!" He told her warmly, as a loving father would to his daughter.

"You think?" She asked with a touched expression.

"I've lived enough to know so. It's okay to live diligently as a youngster, but make sure not to miss a chance of doing things you want and capable of doing . . . you'd never know which one would make you complete. But, it shouldn't break the law!" He stressed the final words clearly. Then smiled warmly at her before they dwell in a short silence.

"Actually, there's something else that's bothering me! But I'm not sure if it's okay to tell you"

"Let's see! The only thing that you may find hard to confide is the one involves matter of the heart. Is it about a boy?" He was like a psychic in Hanna's eyes. As usual he only reacted with a smile. "Okay, how about some

trade. I'll tell you a secret and you'll tell me yours! Or are you going to say that I sound like a business man right now?" He said teasingly, and this time it was Hanna's turn to laugh.

They made an agreement and he told her that his wife was once his girlfriend's best friend. He narrated the story in a very hilarious way that it wasn't possible to judge him for his choice. In the end, Hanna confided in him, she told him about her problem with Chris without mentioning his name. He listened calmly, without making fun, and gave her his piece of advice. She was so happy after talking to that man, and for once she realized what to do.

"Thank you so much sir, I'll take your advice. By the way, I'm Hanna. And you're Mr. . ."

"You can call me James" he grabbed his tool, ready to leave. "James Ashton!" He extended a hand to her.

"James Ashton! Okay Mr. Ash--" While shaking hands, she just froze with astonishment. All that time she was actually talking to the honorable James Ashton, Theresa's husband and the father of Chris and Caro.

He smiled widely while leaving, and turned his head just to say, "Maybe you're not smart after all young lady, but

you're very intelligent! I assure you. Remember to consider what's most important right now and be subtle. Good things happen to those with patience" He said and left.

"What have you done Hanna?" She slapped herself while speaking loudly. "He's James Ashton! Damn this big mouth of mine!" She pinched her lips. After releasing a long sigh, she also walked away.

Here goes nothing, she thought while heading to the lake. She texted Chris to apologize and asked if he could meet her to their secret hiding.

* * * *

Hanna spent more than three hours by the lake without any sign of Chris. She then tried to call his cellphone but he wasn't reachable. Disappointedly, she left the bench and paced around while throwing some pebbles into the water. She was sad, and believed that she'd already lost her best friend. With one final glance to the water in front of her, she decided to leave when she came face to face with Chris. He was standing right on the road, staring at her.

"Did you wait long?" He asked, with undecipherable look.

"Not at all. . . just three hours!" She replied ridiculously, then sniffed, as a tear drop fell off her cheek. "Why didn't you text me back?" She sobbed.

He raised his phone and answered, "My battery died! I'm sorry, the traffic was pretty bad today. And I was out of town!" He was still standing few metres from her. He watched her wiping her tears, and moved closer until they were just a little farther apart. He then spread his arms, beckoning her to come closer. A little hesitant, Hanna lunged forwards and hugged his average yet fit body.

"I'm so sorry! Please forgive me Chris" She said to him. A little smile appeared at the corner of his lips.

"It's okay! I forgive you" he replied, and released her, then stared in the eyes "You've no idea how happy I was when I got your text. I forgot everything afterwards. Because at least once, my hard-headed friend made the first move"

Hanna chuckled, "Does that mean I never say sorry?"

"Do we really have to go into details?"

"No. Let's pass!" She replied coldly, before they both laughed audibly. They head to the bench and had a seat. She turned to face him. "I don't want us to fight again,

atleast not because of Abbie. So, I've made up my mind, whether it's with her or any other girl, so long as you're happy, I'm going to support you" She remembered James's advice earlier that afternoon. *Focus on what's most important, and be subtle.* And for the moment, their friendship was more important than her croocked one-sided crush.

"Thanks Hanna. Although I don't think I can put up with her for too long! In fact, I've been meaning to talk to you about this, but we kept fighting and--"

"Why? I thought you liked her" She asked anxiously, that detail was too crucial to ignore. Chris explained on how things were with Abbie, that she wasn't the girl he exactly needed. There was no common interests between them; they never clicked. "So, just because you don't share some things, you think she's not the one? Seriously Chris, what's the real reason?"

She fixed her gaze into his, determined.

"Alright fine. I don't feel myself around her. . .it's like I'm surpassing the real me! Happy?" He snapped madly, like an angry little boy. They paused for a minute until Hanna started laughing. "You think it's funny? I knew I should've kept it to myself" he pouted and leaned back the bench, with folded arms across his chest.

"No! Look, maybe you should give her a chance to know you better."

"You think?"

"Yeah" she replied.

"I don't know. I find it so hard. I mean. . .Can't she just be like you? You're simple, you understand me, you're not picky. . ." He continued mentioning Hanna's positive traits as she watched him closely, with her own things running her head. "She wants everything done her way!"

"But you still chose her over me!" Without realising, she spilled. Chris stared at her abruptly, as if he wanted to confirm what he'd just heard.

"Are you secretly in love with me?" He suddenly asked her, with a serious look while moving his face closer. She slowly tilted her head to avoid the contact.

"Wh-- what are you doing Chris? Please stop, It's not funny!" She snapped with a scratchy voice. Being too close to him wasn't good for her heart, it was thumping too hard that she started burning.

"How comes you're the only girl I'm so comfortable with?" He whispered without realizing the harm caused by his hoarse voice. For a moment Hanna was about to close her eyes but immediately regained her senses back.

She banged his forehead and got up from the bench. He screamed "Ouch! It was just a joke! That really hurts!" He grimaced.

"Because I'm the only girl who knows what a Playboy you are! And I'll never be one of your groupies junior Mr. Ashton! Maybe you should focus on polishing your charms a bit!" She shoved him off, pretending to be annoyed and walked away but very flustered deep inside. she couldn't get his close-up image out her head.

"What? Aren't I charming enough?" Chris run after her with a big smile. "Hey! We can't fight again? We just made up?" He shouted while following her.

"Don't worry. I'm always up for a new fight in case you've forgotten!"

"Hanna, wait for me!" He kept chasing her as they head back home. At last their problem was half-solved.

When they arrived at the mansion, Abigail was peeking at them through her bedroom window with clenched fists. *"So you've finally crawled back from the dead Hanna. Just wait and see what I've prepared for you, little bitch!"*

CHAPTER 6

Few days post the storm, things were back to normal. Hanna found Mr. Ashton inside the living room by chance one afternoon. Good part, It was just him, in a company of a huge newspaper. He raised his face as soon as he felt her presence at the door.

"Um-- I'm sorry Sir! I just came to clean up, I didn't know you were here." She said, apologetically.

"Hanna?" He smiled. "It's alright. Come, have a seat!" He urged with much decorum, after putting off his reading-glasses.

"Sit? I don't think it's a good idea sir. Mrs. Theresa will skin me alive. Er. . . I mean She'll be mad if she finds me here" She said cautiously.

As always, James laughed a little before tossing the newspaper aside. "Really? Seems like my dear wife is such a bad news around here, huh?"

"No. I didn't mean it that way. It's just. . ."

"Hanna? Do you realize whom you're talking to right now?" This time Mr. Ashton was very serious that it destabilized her.

"Yes sir!"

"Very well then, have a seat. . . no more argument!" He snapped and she followed his order. Immediately, he resumed his normal look. "As long as you haven't done anything wrong, be bold and brave to stand on any ground. It's a way to survive

in this fierce universe. Now where were we?" He continued. His words made her lighten a little.

"So are you suggesting I should force myself to fit where I don't belong just because I fear of being a coward?" She questioned him.

"That's your interpretation. I don't think cowardice is in question here, but self confidence is. No matter the situation, there's always an explanation just as every law has it's exception. Enough of philosophy, don't you have something to tell me?" He immediately changed the subject. It was so hard for Hanna to keep up with, yet found herself loving the company immensely.

"Oh right. Why did you hide that you're Mr.Ashton that day? You made me believe I was talking to a worker?"

"Would it have made any difference if I introduced myself first?"

"Of course yes!" She replied quickly. James stared at her and she quickly retracted, "I mean no! I think it wouldn't have changed anything" She replied, certainly.

"Are you sure?"

"I always speak my mind, regardless who I'm talking to. And I know, it's not too good sometimes, I tend to cause lot's of troubles"

James smiled warmly and said, "It's exactly what I wanted to hear, but I didn't hide my identity, you just didn't ask!"

"Well. . . I guess you're right."

"Speaking of which, did you fix things with that fellow?" He suddenly asked about that sensitive topic. At first Hanna was reluctant to reply considering he was Chris's father, but decided to go with it.

"Yes. And it went very fine. I'm glad I listened to you, because we're fine now so thank you Mr. Ashton!" She answered, a lit of happiness in her face.

"Glad to help. But, are you okay with the results?" He resumed his attention to the conversation and abandoned the paper once again.

"Surprisingly I am. But guess what?" She leaned over, as if she was talking to her friend and James nodded, "I found out that he's not even sure about that other girl. It's like I still have a chance after all"

"Oh yeah? That's a good sign, isn't it?" He asked her and her face dropped.

"Well. . .It is, but I'd rather not keep my hopes up. So, I'll just focus on being friends!"

"Mmm. . . that's clever!" James replied. With a satisfied look. But before he continued, his driver walked in and announced that the car was ready. He dismissed him right away, afterwards. "I think, this is it for today. It was a pleasure having a chat with you Hanna. Unfortunately my time is limited, but perhaps some other time?" He suggested with a smile.

"Of course, some other time! Your children must be very proud of you sir, I'm sure you're a such a good father!" Hanna said, while getting up. Although it was a compliment, Mr. Ashton was indifferent. He glared at her for a while, until she decided to take a step, feeling awkward from his reaction.

And at last he responded, "I'm not sure about that!" His voice made her return to face him, she could almost see the pain and regrets in his eyes. "I'm not a good father, and I think my children don't think so either!" he added and they fell in a short silence.

"Why would you think like that?"

"Because they believe I only care about my career, that I abandoned them. And they're right. . .I've made too many mistakes Hanna" This time he stood up from his chair, and walked towards the window, as if to hide his sadness. Hanna stood still by the door, watching him. "You should get going, I wouldn't want to bore you with my remorse" he smiled weakly at her.

"Perhaps. . . instead of wasting more time feeling remorseful, you should go out there and show them that you actually do care for them, that you can be that proud father!" Hanna snapped with a smile, he abruptly looked at her. "It's not too late to give them more attention, maybe it's the only thing they need! Think about it Mr. Ashton. No child hates their parents, even if they do us wrong". *I'm speaking from experience!* She told him and left. Hanna's biggest wish had been always to meet her father. She never saw him again since she was seven, when

he handed her to his half-sister Victoria. Despite everything, Hanna never resented him, she always believed it was the only option. *I hope my father feels the same way Mr. Ashton does.*

COUPLE of days later, Hanna met Chris for lunch at the cafeteria as they agreed. He was sitting in one of empty tables when she walked over with a very huge smile and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey, took you forever to arrive. I thought you've bailed me out!" He snapped with a blank face while removing his earphones.

"But I'm here, right?" She replied, while grinning as if she had some good news.

"Have you won a free pizza or something?" He teased her, but in a serious way. She frowned, and that made him laugh. "Oh, I should've said a lottery right? I'm sorry it's just, I think if you were to choose between money and food, you'd definitely choose food!"

"CHRIS!" She punched him. He grimaced and then laughed. They drew some attention from the neighbour tables. "Can't you be serious for even a minute?, look, everyone is staring at us" Hanna spoke in a low voice. He looked around as if to confirm her claim and then shrugged.

"So? Do we owe them anything?"

"Oh, you are impossible!"

"Good that you know, I'll go get us some food. The usual, right?" He asked her while on his toes already. She nodded, agreeably and off he left. Minutes later he returned with two hamburgers and drinks "So, what's the occasion? You seem in a good mood" he asked, as he was taking a seat.

"Nothing. Can't I just be in a good mood?"

"If you say so" he replied. They started eating in silence until Hanna asked him if he had any plans for the evening. "Not sure, why?"

"No big deal, I just wanted to watch a movie or your favorite Alvin episodes?" She tried to tempt him since he was a cartoon freak.

"At the secret den?" He asked, referring to that house at the street end.

"Yeah. So?"

"Okay. I can just pass it, after all it's just a dinner!" He agreed, but Hanna couldn't understand the rest of his statement.

"Dinner? What dinner?" Her curious eyes couldn't leave his. He had another bite, took his time to chew as she impatiently waited for his answer.

"It's my father. . .He wants the whole family to dine out tonight!" He paused, seeming a bit uncomfortable to continue, like a certain touchy subject. "Hanna you've been in that house for over six months, but I don't think you even know my father, correct?" His expression was more serious than usual. For a

moment Hanna wanted to lie, but decided to be honest.

"Well, I have seen him some days ago. . .But I didn't even know he was your father until later on" she told him, and the surprised look on his face made her feel guilty.

"You did? Why didn't you tell me?" He glared at her, she was just puzzled, unable to tell him the whole situation. Luckily, he dropped it. "Well it doesn't matter. The thing is, I don't even remember when was the last time we talked. He's always busy. The only thing important for him is his work, you know, it's like he doesn't exist" he spoke with his eyes on the hamburger that he was neither eating nor letting go. Hanna let him say everything he'd kept inside while watching him.

And when he was done, she squeezed his hand that was wandering on the table and let out a warm smile that made him smile back.

"You know I'm not good at feeling sorry, right?" She asked him, but instead his eyes were wide open. "I mean it. So I'm not gonna say sorry! Instead, I say you go to that dinner, and no Alvin tonight. Period" she snapped.

He leaned back his seat. "I really appreciate the not feeling sorry part, but the dinner part, No thanks" He had a sip of the cold mango-juice.

"Listen Chris, I practically don't have a father, so I understand your pain. But right now I think you're being unreasonable, Perhaps he wants to straighten things out, you said yourself that he'd never done this in years. So why not give him a chance?

one dinner won't hurt" she insisted. He leaned over to inspect her closely, as if he couldn't read her.

"Why do I feel like you're taking his side?" He asked, his gaze still fixed on her.

"I'm not taking sides, and I if had to, I'd have taken yours. The only thing I want, is for you to not miss the chance of finding out for yourself" she said. Their faces were few inches apart. Anyone who knew them, and saw them, must had had million questions on the nature of their relationship. He took a deep breath, but his eyes still couldn't leave hers, as if they're pulled together. "I think it's going to be okay, trust me" she reassured him, she very well understood Mr.Ashton's intentions.

"Oh yeah? And how do you know?" He questioned her dubiously.

"I just know. Call it a hunch!" She winked and pulled back, smilingly. Despite her answer, Chris had some doubts about her confidence.

* * * *

At night, Hanna was on her bed trying to get some sleep but couldn't surpass her anxiety. She kept wondering if everything was okay with Chris. She attempted to give him a call but realized it would be a bother. After several minutes of restlessness she decided to grab some notes, lit the studying lamp and sat on the desk.

A little while longer, she heard a sound of a roaring engine, she knew the Ashtons were back. She quickly sent Chris a text to ask how things went, and in like five minutes he called her. A smile spread her face. She threw a glance at her mother who was sleeping soundly before picking up.

"Are you up?" It was the first thing Chris asked after getting her through.

"Of course I am, how else would I be talking to you?" She snapped at him, there was a faint laugh from the other side. "So, how was it?"

"Just fine, I guess--hey, would you like to take a little walk?" He surprisedly asked her.

"Right now?" Hanna prompted, her eyes back on her sleeping mother.

"Yeah, I know it's kind of late but I . . ." he hesitated but she immediately replied;

"I'm coming! Wait just a minute!" She said excitedly.

"Oh, okay!" With that, they hung up.

Hanna peeked on her mother one more time, to make sure she was really asleep. She then grabbed her cardigan and sneaked out as quietly as possible.

Moments later, she found him pacing outside the mansion absently, with his earphones on as usual. "Hi there?" She greeted him, before exhaling heavily, catching a breath.

"Hey, that was fast! Are you sure you don't have some hidden wings?" He feigned to inspect her back, smilingly.

"Cut it out! I just walked like a human I am. So, did you miss my pretty face that much?" She nudged him on the shoulder, with her mischievous air that made him chuckle as if it was the most ridiculous thing he'd heard.

"Yeah! Dream on!" He replied and started walking. She followed him, pretending to sulk until he said, "Okay fine. I did miss you. A little!" He stared at her to see how she'd react. And she seemed soothed, grinning like a gifted little girl. He looked at her for a long moment and ended up laughing, then followed a reign of silence. Hanna was afraid of bringing his father up, that it might upset him.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" Decidely, she broke the silence, while walking slowly beside him, under the shining stars that were full in the sky.

"I don't see anything beautiful about it, a night is just a night!" He replied, obviously trying to provoke her.

"So typical!" She whispered under her own breath. Chris only laughed, he seemed to enjoy her company tremendously. She decided to be upfront. "So, how did it go? the dinner!"

"Just fine. . . but Hanna, can we not talk about it? Just for tonight, please?" He implored, in a serious manner. She nodded. She knew it was a sensitive subject to him, and he seemed to have a lot in his mind despite his smiling face. "Thanks. I promise I'll tell you everything later"

"Yes sir!" She tried to be enthusiastic to not spoil the night that was still young considering her excitement the minute she sneaked out her bedroom. Regardless the distance from the mansion, they found themselves at the lake. Good thing, the street lights were all over the way. "Why do we always end up here? It's so funny!"

"I know right?" He sighed and then sat on the bench. "Are you scared? It's only us here!" He teased her after seeing the way she searched around.

"No, You're here with me, why would I be scared?" She remarked, a lingering gleam in her eyes that reflected the full-moon light.

"What a confidence! You make me sound like a Superman"

"You are a Superman, in my eyes" she declared. They shared a longing gaze for a full minute until Chris cleared his throat and looked away, a little grin at the corner of his mouth. "What are you listening at?" Hanna questioned him. He beckoned her to move closer, then placed one earphone piece to her ear. She listened for a few seconds and looked up at him, frowning. "It's not even a music, what is this?"

"It's instrumental. Forever in love, Kenny G" he grinned. "I like how melancholic and relaxing his tracks are"

"Is this what you listen everyday?"

"No, only when I'm too tired and can't get a sleep"

"Like today? Was that why you wanted a walk?"

"No, I wanted to see you" he replied but with indifference. Hanna felt her heart fluttering, she smiled and leaned over, trying to listen his famous instrumental again. She slowly rested her head on his shoulder, as if drawn by a strange energy, uncomfortable at first. Chris looked at her, then smiled, he continued humming the music, his one hand tapping the top of the bench. As the track changed, the tapping stopped. He found himself wrapping Hanna to his side, and they eventually connected. Everything felt in place; the soothing music, the warm breeze and the beautiful twinkling-sky. It was like nothing else existed, just the two of them. They didn't even realize when they'd fallen asleep, when Chris opened his eyes, he stared at his phone to check the time, then at Hanna who was lost in the west. "Hanna? Hanna? Get up" he slightly shook her.

"What?"

"Get up! It's getting late".

"Already?" She finally got a grip. "Oh God, what time is it?" She grasped, while flinching her eyes, with several yawns.

"It's almost 2 a.m"

"What? Okay, I think we should head back home"

"Yeah, let's go" he agreed.

The whole street was silent like no one lived there as they walked back home. Chris made sure that Hanna entered the sharing house before heading to his room. Fortunately, Sarah was snoring as Hanna tiptoed back to bed. She couldn't stop

reminiscing the moment at the lake. She smiled like a fool under the sheets.

Early in the morning, of the following day. Chris heard a knock at his door and a minute later Abbie dashed in. She jumped to his bed and kissed him voluptuously.

"Morning babe. . ." she gave him her best smile as he pulled himself together as if he'd been attacked.

"Hey hey, what is this, huh? Don't you think it's too early? He demanded, he wasn't too happy with her gesture, apparently. He sneaked off the bed and put on a T-shirt that was lying on the couch.

"What's wrong with me kissing you?" She snapped. "Never mind, I'm doing some shopping today. Can you come with me?" She walked over to him, and wrapped her arms around his neck seductively. She was still in her revealing night dress, but Chris detached himself right away.

"I'm sorry Abbie but I can't. . .I need to study today" he said while heading to the bathroom and she followed behind, this time more annoyed.

"What's wrong with you? Do you even consider me your girlfriend? Because as far as I remember, we haven't done anything that normal couple do, I'm so tired of trying to get your attention. Fine, I'll just go with aunt Theresa. She's the only one on my side anyway" she said with tears in her eyes, she was

really hurt by his indifference towards her.

Chris sighed, he put back the toothbrush he was holding and looked her in the eyes. "Things aren't like that Abbie. . . I just need to study, that's all. Finals are around the corner and it's my last shot"

"I know Chris. But I'm also aware that if it were that stupid servant girl, you wouldn't hesitate to postpone anything just to be with her. You know what, you should just date her, you'd make a very good couple. Good luck with your studying" she snorted before storming out.

"Abbie? Abbie?" He called after her, but she left anyway, and slammed the door behind. He leaned against the wall, sighing. *What kind of a mess have I gotten myself into!*

Later that day, he joined Carolyn and Hanna at the garden pavilion where they planned to study. The weather was cool, hence took advantage of it to revise for more than three hours, without any break until Caro banged the table. They all turned to see her.

"I think this is enough studying for a life time. I mean, aren't you guys tired?" She snapped.

Hanna chuckled. "I was hoping someone would say that" she said. Chris shook his head as if they were a couple of a lost cause, before he continued with his notes.

"Well, I think I need a big Cocktail right now" Caro said.

"CAROLYN!" This time Chris shouted.

"Alright big bro, relax. I meant a fruit cocktail, non-alcoholic!, the one they serve in sweet-sixteenth birthdays, happy? What a party-pooper" she scowled. Hanna couldn't resist laughing as the siblings exchanged attitudes. Suddenly, Caro took a deep audible breath and said. "Oh that's all I needed right now, look who's here?" The others turned their gaze and found Abbie walking their way with several shopping bags. Despite the argument she had had with Chris that morning, she looked perfectly okay, with a bright smile on her pretty face.

"Hey guys? Oh, I think I'm the only one left behind" Abbie greeted them pleasantly.

"Yeah, some of us are not as smart as you are. You even went shopping" Caro replied.

"Yes my dear sister-in-law. To me shopping is twice important" Abbie said, before shifting her gaze towards Chris and placed her hand on his. "Chris, I'm sorry about this morning, I was just over the edge"

"Oh, okay" he replied, hesitantly. Everyone was surprised with her new behavior. "So, where's mom? I thought you two left together?"

"We did, but she had her personal errands to run" she answered and moved aside.

"Okay. I think I really need that drink right now" Caro snapped

again, already up her feet, and Hanna volunteered to join her, but before leaving Abbie held her hand.

"Sorry Hanna, can you please help me put these to my room? I've forgotten something important inside the car" she asked in a polite way that left everyone stunned.

"Um . . . Okay" Hanna took the bags.

"Thank you" she said and walked away. The rest stared at one another for a long while.

"Wow! She actually called you by your name? Oops, I'm getting goosebumps! Is it full-moon tonight?" Caro said with her usual sarcastic touch.

"Oh come on Caro, she was just being nice" Chris said, then stood up abruptly. "I'm going to get my text book, I think I left it at my classmate's. He also left. With no more to say, the girls decided to leave as well.

After making sure everyone was out of the pavilion, Abbie returned back there. She took Hanna's bag, inspected the surrounding one more time and made sure no one was present, she slide a silver bracelet into one of the pockets inside the bag. With an evil smirk on her mouth, she left as quickly as she went. *Let's see how you get out of this one little servant*, she thought.

CHAPTER 7

"I can't believe there's nothing to eat here" Caro was rumbling to herself while returning the empty containers to one of the kitchen-cabinets. At that moment, Hanna walked in, after taking Abbie's stuffs to her bedroom.

"Something wrong?" She asked Caro whose face spoke troubles.

"No, I just thought I could find some cookies, cake or something, but there's nothing. Should I just go to the bakery?" She replied, then remained thoughtful as Hanna inspected the kitchen as if checking for something particular.

"Or maybe we can bake one" she suggested with great enthusiasm, Caro stared back, stunned.

"Who? You?"

"Yes, but I'll need a little help. Which flavour do you like, chocolate? Vanilla? Strawberry? lemon?"

"Hey, you surprise me. . . Well, I like everything you mentioned but let's do lemon, I see we've got plenty of them" Caro said. Hanna smiled, deep inside she was hoping the same option, since it was Chris's favourite.

They started working on it. "So, do I squeeze the lemon juice or what?" Caro asked.

"Are you serious?" Hanna bursted out laughing.

"I am!"

"Okay look, we're only dealing with the lemon-peel. . ." she demonstrated a little and Several minutes later the mixture was ready, Hanna placed it inside the oven and left it with the timer.

"I swear I don't know anything about baking, but are you sure we did it right? I mean is that how those delicious cakes are made?"

"Trust me, I grew up in a bakery!" Hanna winked at her. She smiled, skeptically. "Okay, that was literal. What i mean is, my aunt has a bakery so I learned different recipes from her"

"Wow. I'm envious!" Caro snapped, with a weird face that made Hanna laugh. As they continue exchanging stories, Abbie walked in as if she was pulled by the awesome aroma considering the way she was inhaling the air.

"I smell a fresh baked cake, tell me you're baking one?" She said, it forced a laugh from the others.

"You got that right, I just hope you won't ruin your diet with this holy temptation" Caro replied, ironically as usual.

"I appreciate your sarcasm Caro, but don't worry, one day's calories won't ruin my life-term project. So I'm definitely eating that cake, I'll be back!" She said excitedly, and left. Her change of attitude kept surprising them.

"Just between us. . . don't you think Abbie is acting weird? She's like super nice, that's not the Abbie I know!" Caro said, with suspicious look, while trailing her gaze after Abigail's back.

Hanna shrugged, unsure on what to think. "I don't know, maybe she's trying to get along, like what Chris said"

"Maybe! Speaking of my brother, he won't know what he'd just missed, too bad for him"

"I'll save a piece for him, don't worry" Hanna said, a warm smile on her lips. Caro walked over and looked her in the eyes.

"I should've seen it coming,huh? You and Chris, can't stop taking each other's side, can you?" She shook her head as Hanna blushed, then walked past her. "I'll go get our bags, I don't think there'll be any more studying" She said and left.

When alone, Hanna sent Chris a quick text and told him to hurry back if he didn't want to miss his favorite dessert. In just a minute her phone buzzed and she started giggling as she read his text reply which seemed to be funny.

When Caro returned, she eyed her dubiously, but kept her cool. Sometime later, Abbie joined them. For once they had a decent conversation while laughing like good friends, and when the cake was done, Abbie suggested that they should decorate it.

"Fine by me, I'll prepare the topping" Hanna said and got to work, although Caro, on the other hand looked disappointed.

"Guys, really? Can't we just eat it already?" She pouted.

"No. I've always wanted to do this, so please Carolyn, let's do it" Abbie begged, she was so enthusiastic about the task. Caro rolled her eyes, but agreed. "Okay. . .let's put red in here" she also moved closer.

"Just great! We might as well make it a rainbow, so everyone's favourite color will be displayed" Caro snapped, her eyes fixing the cake. It took almost an hour to finish their culinary project.

When Chris returned, he heard scattered laughs that surprised him, and what's more stunning was to find the three girls together in the kitchen, each with a slice of colourful cake on hand. He cleared his throat to gather their attention and asked;

"What's going on here? Are you celebrating something?" He took a step closer, still unsure of the situation. Before anyone could answer, Abbie walked over with a piece, a broad grin on her beautiful face and fed him. He took a moment contemplating it's flavour. Caro and Hanna exchanged a meaningful glance then smiled.

"Delicious, isn't it?" She asked him.

"Obviously! It's Hanna's lemon cake. But that doesn't explain what's going on here" he replied with high certainty, that destabilized Abbie, with one glance one could realize that she was hurt, especially the fact that he knew the taste of the cake by heart.

"So you already know that Hanna can bake?" She asked, and there was a silence in the room as if a tornado was yet to come.

"Of course I do, if you paid a little more attention you'd realize that all those delicious desserts are made by her. Anyways, I don't know what's the occasion but do save a piece for me" He winked at Hanna who replied with her best smile, without caring of Abbie who was still standing right in front of Chris. "Well, I'll be

with Herman outside, he's checking my car"

"Herman? Does that mean Mom is back?" Caro asked.

"Yeah, and can you please wipe out that dirt on your mouth? You're such a mess" he referred to his sister.

"It's the icing, and I'm not a mess" Caro replied coldly. With just a sniff, Chris left.

Abbie who was so annoyed, fixed her composure first before returning back to face the girls, with her plastic smile. "I think I've had enough, I'll go see aunt Theresa. Thanks for the cake Hanna, it was delicious" she tried her best to act normal before walking away.

"Do you think she's mad?" Hanna turned to Caro.

"I don't know, and I couldn't care less. When comes to Abbie, I never know what to expect" she replied, thoughtful, as if she never really trusted her. "I'll wash the dishes"

"Cool. I'll clean up this mess before my mother walks in, apparently this kitchen is her sanctuary" Hanna said and they shared a smile.

When done, they left the kitchen just to find a commotion in the living room. Sarah and Maria with their grocery bags standing aside, Theresa seated on her expensive sofa while Abbie was standing at the stairs, with sad looking eyes.

"As you can see ma'am, we're just getting back so I don't understand what you're talking about" Sarah answered

Theresa's inquiry as Hanna and Caro arrived, confused looks on their faces.

"It's okay aunt, let's forget it. It's just a bracelet, I can buy a new one!" Abbie told Theresa, then took a long breath as if she was so tired of it all.

"No dear, I'm very sorry but this concerns the safety of my house, I can't let it slide. Who entered Abbie's room today?" Theresa asked, she sounded very determined.

"I did. But what's going on here?" Still confused, Hanna asked the people who were by then staring at her as if she'd killed someone. Theresa stood up, then walked up graciously towards her, but with an ice-cold look.

Caro immediately cut in. "Mom what's going on? I heard a bracelet, what bracelet?" She shifted her gaze from Theresa to Abbie. Her mother explained the situation but in turn, Caro frowned and shoot Abbie a piercing look. "And so? Are you trying to say that Hanna took it?"

"Yes, if no one else entered her room today, then how could it disappear just like that?" Theresa replied, her eyes on Hanna who was already panicking.

"No! I didn't take anything, tell her Abbie, I only went there because you asked me to bring your stuff's!" Hanna looked at Abbie for a back up, but she looked away.

Caro added, "This is ridiculous mom, Hanna is incapable of stealing, what? A bracelet? Don't make me laugh"

Like a useless thing, Theresa shoved her off and moved closer to Hanna. "Where is the bracelet? You better come clean before I call the cops!" She snapped at her. By then, tears were lingering Hanna's eyes, unable to say more. For the first time she felt defeated from such a humiliation. "Fine. In that case, I'll have to search your bag"

"I said I didn't take anything!" She screamed, her voice scratchy. At the corner of her eyes, she could see her mother's furious gaze, and Maria fidgeting with fear. She tightened her grip on the backpack she was holding.

"Look Hanna, let's say you didn't do it, then Why don't you let Aunt search your bag, if you don't have anything to hide" Abbie finally made an input, and Theresa nodded in agreement. Hanna was even more shocked, she stared at them with disbelief, then at her mother who was quiet the whole time, hoping she would say something, and she eventually did.

"Give them your bag Hanna!" After a long frustration sigh, Sarah snapped.

Hanna was completely perplexed. "MOM! How could y--!" Tears fell from her eyes, uncontrollably.

"If it's the only way to prove your innocence, then so be it" She insisted, unable to face her daughter in the eyes, but suffering deep inside.

"Well, at least the mother has some sense. . . Give. Me. The. Bag" Theresa grabbed it. Hanna's eyes were still on Sarah, she felt so betrayed that she let Theresa had her way. But even

before opening the bag, Chris appeared and snatched it away, making everyone surprised with his grand entrance. "What do you think you're doing son? Give me that bag!"

"No mother. That's enough." He shouted furiously. Behind him was Carolyn, she was the one informed him of the chaos. "What is this? Some kind of a circus?" He continued.

"You don't know what's going on Christian, so stay out of it!" Theresa replied, angrily.

"I do, and I think it's very ridiculous. If someone wants to frame Hanna, should've at least used something commendable! A bracelet? Are you kidding me?" He referred that remark to Abbie, while directly looking at her. His mother stared at him, stunned.

"You're really under her spell son! I don't recognize you. Just, what makes you so sure of her?"

Before replying, Chris looked at Hanna for a long moment, the sight of her tearing eyes made his jaw contract. "Because it's her. Because it's Hanna, not somebody else" Hanna swallowed hard, as if all the pain she felt a minute ago disappeared. Chris looked back at her mother, "I'll take care of this mother, just go to your room and get your beauty sleep"

"I can't believe this. My God, what have I done to deserve this" Theresa lamented, holding her head as if she suffered migraine and ascended the stairs, slowly.

Chris returned Hanna's bag and asked everyone to leave. They all did, except Abbie who was glaring at him with contempt. He

also stared at her in exactly the same way, and without saying a word, she ran off upstairs to her room. Once he's left alone, he sat down on the stairs, as if taking a break from a long hassle. With all the ruckus, it was like he'd forgotten to breathe and at the moment, he took a very deep one while thinking of everything that'd just taken place in a short period of time.

SOME time later, Hanna took a refuge at the secret den. Solitude was all she needed after what happened. She was inside, sobbing. All her life, she'd never experienced such an accusation, Nevertheless, feeling so humiliated and that, in her mother's presence. That hurt her the most. In the middle of her thinking she heard some footsteps from outside and immediately straightened up, wiped her tears and waited to see who's going to show up.

"I knew I'd find you here!" Chris snapped. He was at the door, breathing audibly, then walked in. "You were crying? Why?"

Hanna sniffed, "It's none of your business" She replied.

He raised an amused eyebrow. "Oh, so now it's not my business! But I never heard that when I saved your ass out there"

"I knew you were going to boast! Always a snob!" She smiled weakly, and he laughed. He took a seat beside her, on the floor. They stayed silent for a while until she asked "Why did you do it?"

"Because it was the right thing to do" he replied, as confident as always. She looked up at him, stunned.

"How do you know that? What if I really took it?"

"Then I'll go get myself a brain check-up!"

"Will you please be serious for once Chris" Hanna slapped him slightly on the thigh.

"I am serious!" He insisted. "Hand me your bag!" demanded he. Without any question, Hanna complied. He went through it for a minute, as Hanna watched him without knowing his intention.

"What are y--" She stopped middle way when he showed her the silver bracelet from her bag. She was dumbstruck. "What? How c-- I swear I didn't--"

"Hey, relax. I know it wasn't you. I just knew it!" He clenched his fists.

"Wait, how did you know it was there?"

"I could see it in her eyes"

"Who? Your mother?"

"No. Abbie! She was so certain that they'd find it in your bag. . maybe I was just lucky, but I felt something was off"

"No way, is that why she was so insistent that they search my bag? Does this mean Abbie put the bracelet inside my bag just to make me look like a thief? And-- and that's why she asked me to help take her things to her room?" She asked nonstop, as if he'd just opened her eyes. It was like everything came to light,

but it made her feel even worse.

"Yes Hanna, and I'm really sorry!" Chris said, his eyes still on hers, despite her heartache, she tried to be normal. She smiled and poked his nose. "Ouch! What's that for?"

"That's for misusing the apology! What have you done wrong?" She resumed her mischief, but it wasn't enough to make him feel better.

"I can't stop feeling like all this is my fault. We both know why Abbie did it." Hi sighed softly, while looking at the bracelet in his hand. "But don't worry, I'm gonna put an end to this." He said with a determined look.

"May I know what you're referring at?"

"Nothing. Just what I should've done a long time ago" he decided to leave her in suspense, this time with a warm smile, before returning the poke back, and made her cream a little. He laughed heartily. "Revenge is the dish best served cold"

"Oh yeah? And you think I'm just gonna let it slide?" She tried to hit him but he grabbed her hands and they started a silly fight.

"Only if I decide otherwise" he twisted her hand and she arched her back against his chest. "I know, you think it's very unfair, don't you stubborn girl?" He tightened his grip, but she managed to break free.

"Not at all. In case you're forgetting Ashton, I'm an athlete!" She tried to jerk him but ended up falling on top of him and they both slid on the floor. There was a pause for a moment, as they

stayed silent, feeling the impact. Faces were so close to one other, they could each feel other's breath. Hanna swallowed hard, while Chris's eyes fixed her. "I-- I'm sorry!" Back to her senses, she tried to get up, but surprisingly Chris pulled her back, her eyes widened.

"Now I'm the one who thinks it's unfair. What to do? I feel like kissing you right now" he said, in almost a whisper.

"K-kiss?" She whispered like a hypnotized person, her heartbeat accelerated. Their faces kept getting closer, until his lips dominated hers. He kissed her passionately as if he'd been waiting forever for the moment to come. With eyes closed, Hanna let her mind taken over by the strong sensation that it brought, hoping that it'd never end. Chris flipped her down, and continued with the art that he seemed to have mastered well. She encircled his neck, and pressed him harder against her body until they both stopped in an instant just before crossing the boundary. They immediately stood up and looked in different directions, embarrassed. "Um. . . I think we should go" Hanna said, still unable to face him.

"Yeah, we should!" He replied fast, and suddenly bumped to each other as she tried to pick her bag and he the bracelet. "Are you hurt?" He asked her, worriedly.

"No. I'm fine"

Hanna rushed out. Chris stared at the crime scene one more time, then sighed heavily before leaving.

On the way home, the atmosphere was tense. But either way, Chris decided to break the ice. He cleared his throat, and Hanna stared at him.

"Did you say something?" She urged.

"No! But well . . .About the kiss--" He uttered haltingly.

"A kiss? What kiss?" She snapped nervously, almost loudly. He was surprised at first but found himself laughing from her reaction.

"Nothing. I mean, nothing happened" he said.

"Exactly! Nothing happened!" She insisted. She then looked away, a smirk on her blushing face. They walked back home in silence, until arrived at the mansion.

"Well, we're home now. I'll see you later? Or tomorrow perhaps" Chris said.

"Tomorrow! and Thank you. . . for helping me today" She said and he nodded, for a moment she was loss at words. "Chris?" She called him before he went his way. He returned around with arched eyebrows. After hesitating for a while, she said. "It was the best! The kiss!". Finally she made a comment, and from the look on Chris's face, he was very delighted. She bit her lower lips, shyly.

"I know!" He replied and walked away, leaving her in much more suspense, wondering what his last remark meant.

When inside, Chris head straight to Abbie's room, determined

to give her his piece of mind.

CHAPTER 8

For a moment, Hanna lived in a serendipitous world. She kept fantasizing about the kiss for the rest of the day, and like a miracle, she'd completely forgotten about the bracelet incident that could've ruined her day. She was totally zoned-out when her mother entered the room.

"I thought you'd be angry, but why are you smiling like an idiot, all by yourself?" Sarah asked, while scrutinizing her carefully. Despite being startled, Hanna walked up to her and hugged her tightly that she felt strange "What? Why are y--"

"Oh mom! I love you so much!" She kissed her cheek.

"Uh. . .I love you too. But aren't you mad at me?" Still in disbelief, Sarah asked.

"Mad? Of course not"

"Oh. Okay."

Meanwhile, Chris was outside Abbie's door; she'd refused to let him in, claiming that she never wanted to see him after everything he did that afternoon. In the end, he forced his way in.

"Believe me, if it were up to me, I wouldn't be here either." Chris told her, ignoring her protest. "Here, I came to give you this" he took her hand, and placed the bracelet on her palm. She was very shocked, but she quickly straightened her face.

"It's mine. Where did you get it? I bet that loser friend of yours gave you!" Abbie snapped, with a victimized expression. That reaction made Chris laugh for a second, with his hands on the door frame, he leaned over.

"Aren't you at least ashamed after what you did? You know, I knew something was off the minute you started acting nice towards Hanna, but then I thought, maybe she's really making an effort! But I was wrong, did you really have to do that?" He asked her, in a low tone of voice, with his narrowed eyes staring at her.

Abbie sighed, raised an eyebrow while clasping her lips together as if trying to hide the tension running through her, "I don't know what you're talking about" she replied, dryly.

"Oh spare me that crap Abbie! I know you put that bracelet inside her bag, just to make her look like a thief. Look me in the eyes, and try to deny it" He held her shoulders tightly while giving her a cold gaze. Instead of shuddering from his grip, she just stared back at him, with a determined look.

"You're right. I did it" she spilled. He slowly let go of her, a disappointment gleam in his eyes. This time Abbie held her waist and took a deep breath. "At home, at college, she's always your center of attention! I'm your girlfriend Chris, but how many times have we gone out? Kissed? Oh, don't even let me go further because you might probably say we should wait until marriage! In short, you made me do it, I wanted to separate you two, but guess what? As always, you appeared just like her guardian angel, and took her side. You know, all i did up to now

was trying to get close to you; I like you Chris, but do you?" She asked with a laugh, but a bitter one, her eyes full of tears. She glared at him for a while and then walked to her bed, and sat down. There was a heavy silence as if both of them were contemplating the situation.

Decidedly, Chris paced forward, and stood in front of her, "Fine. Let's say I'm at fault, I'm the bad guy" he paused. Abbie raised her face to look at him. "You're right, I'm not good for you, that's why, we should end here! Let's break up Abbie!" He snapped, in a very normal way.

"Ha! I wonder what took you so long to say that. . . In the end, Hanna got what she wanted! and very easily"

"Can you stop it? Hanna has nothing to do with this, and you know it"

"You're wrong! This is what she wanted, can't you see that best friend of yours is in love with you? Or are you just pretending because you also feel the same way?" She screamed, without realizing the intensity of her words. Chris looked at her then shook his head, as if she was some crazy woman. He walked out without another word.

AFTER such a break up, Abbie swore to move out. Considering her ego, she never wanted to lose, especially to Hanna whom she always considered the lowest person.

On her way out, the following early dawn, she met Carolyn. She

wanted to walk past her, but then decided that it wasn't worthy leaving without congratulating her. She looked up to her, defiantly.

"What?" Caro asked her.

"Are you happy now? Seems like you and your little servant friend have got your way" Abbie replied, fists on her waist as usual.

"Woah woah. . . Seems like someone has forgotten to drink her low-fat milk this morning! Now what are you talking about girl, can you quit the subtlety?" Caro had no idea about their break up, so at the moment, she understood nothing.

"We broke up, don't tell me you don't know about this. I'm sure you must be overjoyed!" She bitterly uttered, with fierce expression.

Now Caro's face was stunned. "Oh you did? Well I'm sorry, but don't you think that was bound to happen?" Despite the surprising piece of news, she still asked her. "I mean, let's be honest here, you dragged him into that relationship, no?"

Those words seemed to stir Abbie, she got really hysterical, as if Caro had just crossed the line. "How dare you! Are you saying that I forced that poor brother of yours to be with me? Is he a nine-years-old-boy?" She lunged forwards.

Caro stepped back, "No at all, and can you relax please?" She asked her, ironically. "Look, Chris may be very smart, a top student but he's a total idiot. He's so stupid when comes to

women. . . he doesn't even know whom he actually likes. Anyways, you brought it upon your self Abbie, what you did was extremely foolish, so don't blame others for your failure!" She told her, in a serious tone of voice. There was some truth in her words, even Abbie knew that, but she was hurt and only saw her as an enemy. Carolyn attempted to leave when Abbie suddenly asked her;

"Why do you hate me so much?" That question intrigued Caro, she turned the eyes towards her for a long moment. "I understand you prefer Hanna over me, but I've never done you any wrong, yet you were hostile towards me from the very first time we met" there was sadness in her eyes, it was her first time showing sincerity.

"I don't hate you! For God's sake, you make me sound like a mean sister-in-law!" She pretended to be offended, just to reduce the tension, but there was a string of sentiments, not for long as she immediately resumed her normal composure. "But it doesn't mean I like you either. . . Wanna know why? Because you're so egocentric; You want the spotlight, to be loved, admired and respected by everyone, for free. But you're forgetting that all those things are earned, through the way you treat others. Yes, we're all imperfect, but I just can't help it, I despise those who look down on others."

"Oh really now? Is that all?"

"No, there's something else. I'm sure everyone knows that Hanna loves Chris more than just a friend, well except my stupid brother himself who can't see the obvious. But she never played

foul just to have him, like a good friend, she stuck to him. Would you do that if you're in her place?"

Abbie stared at her shortly, then laughed out loudly, "Oh how hilarious! It turns out the servant has such a grand love for the young master, how pathetic! Why don't you give it a rest? Playing cupid and all? Chris is a grown-ass man, he doesn't need anyone to make his choices" She snapped, cynically.

Carolyn smirked and whispered to her ear, "You can laugh all you want Abigail, but we both know that the very same servant, is your biggest threat. And guess what, if Chris decides to be with her now that you're no longer together, I'll support him. I've never seen him happier like the way he's been spending his senior year, all thanks to Hanna! But don't worry, I'm not the kind of little sister who interferes my brother's love life, in the end, he alone will be the judge"

She could see Abbie getting all wrecked up as her body stiffen with anger. "Well you can dream on, because unfortunately, your mother would never allow that, and if it happens, she'll make Hanna's life a living-hell. Since you so love humanity, I'm sure you wouldn't love seeig the poor girl getting hurt!" This time Abbie spoke with sarcasm, and it really got into Carolyn, she pat her on the shoulder and smiled. "This egocentric, spoiled brat, and whatever name you call her, is leaving. See you dear sister-in-law, that was just a battle, the war is yet to come!" She smirked and walked out.

* * * *

The following week, Chris left early for college, together with Hanna. It was the first day of the finals, and he happened to have his first exam in the morning. They rode in his car as Hanna asked;

"What's going on? You usually ride with Abbie, but I don't see her today.

He frowned. As if he wasn't too happy to hear that name. Hanna couldn't contain her confused look, especially due to his silence, but abruptly a pair of his hazel eyes stared at her, with calmness this time. "You don't know? Abbie left last night, She'll be staying in-campus with her friends or something, until the exams are over" he replied.

"Really? That's odd! But then again, it's finals right? I guess even smart people like her try to do their best, and yet some dimwits like Hanna get a beautiful eight-hours sleep" she said ironically, before relaxing her back at the leather passenger seat. There was a faint smile at the corner of Chris's mouth but it immediately disappear.

"We broke up! Maybe that's why" he remarked. From the look of his face, he wasn't proud of it, but yet he believed it was the best decision. Hanna's eyes widened, her mouth agape. "Okay, I know that look. It wasn't because of the bracelet, so hold your horses. . .I just felt it wasn't fair to continue such a relationship"

That increased her confusion. "What? Why?"

"The truth is, I don't feel anything special for her, so why being with her? Look, I'd rather not talk about that. We're over and I

believe it's best for both of us"

"Oh! okay" Hanna wasn't sure if she was happy with the news or not, but deep down, it sparked a little hope that was slowly dying; the hope of finally communicating her feelings to him, maybe. But on the second thought, she didn't want to raise her expectations, even though her heart kept receiving mixed signals after the kiss they shared. They arrived at the campus and she asked him to drop her off first before parking. "I guess this is it, thanks for the ride and Good luck!" She quickly snapped and grabbed the handler.

"Hey hey hey, you're leaving? just like that?" He leaned over the steering, eyeing her teasingly, with a spunky smile. She stared back, wide-eyed. "I mean. . . without a good luck kiss?" His voice was husky, feigning shyness.

"A kiss? Since when? Oh, I know--Wake up Ashton junior, will you? that one kiss was a silly mistake, don't tell me you took it too serious?" She seated herself back, staring at him provokingly.

"Hey, why are you bringing that up? OK, not an actual kiss, just a peck! You know you're my lucky charm" he insisted, his face tilted slightly. For a moment, Hanna was hesitant, she swallowed hard while looking at him, wondering if he was serious or not, but there was a determined look behind his mischievous smile.

"Just a peck, right?" She asked, still unsure and he nodded. She caught a long breath and slowly leaned over and placed her lips on his cheek, which in turn, they landed on his hot lips after he brushed his face aside. "You scheming jerk!" She pulled away

very fast and spanked his head. He grimaced, laughingly as she quickly jumped out of the car.

"Hey, with that you gonna blow the exam. I promise" he snapped, still laughing, especially at her growling annoyed voice.

"You tricked me. Go away!" She slammed his SUV door and left, blushing, and he was contented with pleasure, as if his day had just started beautifully.

Later that day, at the sunset, they met again at the canteen. Hanna spotted him first, she waved and walked over to him, after saying something to the girl she'd arrived with. Chris was with his group of other seniors. He quickly got his things and followed her, leaving some cheering comments from his group as if they were making fun of him.

"Hey, how was the exam?" He snapped as soon as he arrived before her, hands in his pockets.

"Just as it sounds, EXAMS! You already know I despise whoever started it, it was the worst kind of invention!" Hanna replied, and they both shared a laugh. Abruptly she changed her face, when Raphael, one of Chris's friends waved at her. "Oh, it's that dork again! Please let's go before he starts bickering!" She gave them a big smile before walking out. Raphael was very talkative among all his friends, they all knew Hanna and never believed that Chris and she, were just friends.

"Just leave him be. Hey, I saw you with that cutie, is she your

classmate?" Chris referred to the pretty girl she was with at the cafeteria.

"Natasha? Yeah she is, why?" Hanna asked, a little curious as they slowly walked past few students entering the buzzed students-junction.

"Nothing! She's just so damn hot! You should've introduced me, Come to think of it, I don't know any of your friends. It's not fair" He replied, pretending to make a face.

"Yeah right. So that you can go on hitting on them, right?"

"Of course not! I'm not hitting on her, I was just appreciating God's creation. Is it a crime?"

"No, it's okay. While you're at it, why don't you go back and ask for her name, what she likes, her favourite color and all other pick-up-lines you use to woo girls, huh? In fact, I can give you her number if you want to" She snapped, annoyed. Without realizing that her reaction left him stunned in the middle of the way. Chris looked around, afraid that people were staring, considering how angry Hanna was and the way she snapped at him.

"Hey relax! Why are you getting all wrecked-up? I was just kidding. But I won't mind taking her number" he grinned, and said his latter sentence in almost a whisper.

"Woah! I can't believe it! Fine,here, take it!" She scrolled her phone and showed him, but the look on her face was enough to shove him away. Her whole body was tense, with her firm eyes

shooting fire-beams.

He swallowed hard. "No thank you. If looks could kill, I would be six-feet-under by now" he said in a calm voice, as if he'd just survived the death-row. She just lowered her gaze and took a deep breath. They continued walking without talking, just for a short while. "But seriously, why are you getting mad at me?" He ended up raising his voice, and stirred things all over again.

"Who said I'm mad? I'm not mad!" She replied, with the same tone.

"Of course you are. Look, you sound like a jealousy wife. Wait, Is that it? Are you jealous?" He halted, both eyes on her, both unsure and amused with her flustered look.

She immediately turned her gaze. "Wh-- what? Jealous? Me? You're so sick upstairs Chris Ashton!" She snapped at him, more angrier. It seemed like he had hit the bullseye.

"Alright. No need to shout, I get it!" He smiled, still stunned by her defensive attitude. He even lagged behind for a while, contemplating her behaviour. They were almost at the parking lot, when she suddenly told him that she was taking a bus home. "No. That's crazy. Why would you take a bus?"

"Because I don't feel like riding your damn car! Since Abbie is not here, why don't you take Natasha instead?"

"Now this is too much! I tho--" before he realized, she was already gone. "Okay, do as you wish! It's what you always do anyway. My God, what a temper!" He was all alone, mumbling to

himself.

In forty minutes, the bus dropped Hanna at the stop and she pushed her way home. The sky was almost dark as she took a path in the tree-trunk road, listening to the churning leaves as the evening air blew past the dry Autumn-leaves. Normally, quite few people passed at that time due to small number of residents and the fact that most of them had private cars. She was almost alone, her mind was ablaze; she knew she'd made a mistake. Acting all immature with the jealousy fit wasn't part of her plan and she felt so stupid.

A small breath escaped her, as she braced her backpack and tried to speed up a little. The mansion was only ten minutes from the bus stop, it took her less than that to reach and at the same time, Chris's car arrived, as if he'd been tailing her. She felt like hiding beneath the ground when their eyes met. He got off and waited for her in the middle of the way that led to the sharing house. She got ahold of herself, paced forwards and stood right in front of him.

"Chris I--" she tried to say something but he cut her short.

"I'm sorry!" He said, in such a tender way that made her taken a back. "Trust me, I was just messing around about that Natasha girl. I didn't know it would offend you like that. Please forgive me, huh?" He clasped his hands, imploringly.

"I think I should be the one to apologize. I behaved like a bitch, plus you didn't do anything wrong. I'm just over the edge with

the exams and everything, it makes me a little sensitive. I'm really sorry Chris" she said. Evidently, her remark surprised him. He nodded his head hesitantly. "And I'm being serious, I can introduced you to her, she's a nice girl, I'm sure she'll like you" she added, but that one left him rather perplexed.

"You'd do that?"

"Yes. I mean it"

"Oh, I see! But it's not necessary, like I said, I was only teasing you" he reassured her, and they both nodded, satisfied with the outcome. After a short resigned silence, Chris bursted with his sardonic laugh all of a sudden.

"Why are you laughing?" Bewildered, Hanna asked him.

"I'm sorry, it's nothing much!" He replied, almost choked from all the laughter. "It's just, I remembered something Abbie told me when we broke up, hearing you talk right now, made me realized how silly she was"

"Abbie? What did she tell you" she questioned him, her curiosity beyond limit.

"That you're in love with me! Can you believe how crazy she can get? I don't know where the hell she got that idea" he snapped, still laughing, but there was something different on Hanna's face. She was shocked as if her heart skipped a beat. She was gaping with eyes widely fixed on him. He coughed twice to clear his throat and said, "Well, since we're cool now, I'll head in. I think what I need is a quick shower. Good night Hanna". Still,

there was no response from her, she was dumbstruck, million thoughts inside her head. Before he could take a step, she took her chances.

"What if it's true? What Abbie said" With unknown courage, she asked him. His reaction was normal at first, until he realized the proximity of her question; his expression changed immediately.

"What?" He snapped, while glaring at her.

"What if she told you the truth, that I'm really in love with you?" She repeated the same question, but this time with a more serious tone, staring straight to his baffled eyes.

He slowly moved closer, as if it was the only way to rid himself from such a confound. "What does this suppose to mean Hanna?" His husky voice pierced her ears. Without moving an inch, she kept glaring at him, hoping he would use his smart brain to get answers for himself. "Hold on, does this mean y--"

"I'm in love with you? Yes, I am" she finally spilled the beans. There was unreadable expression on Chris's face, a dejected look that mingled with shock. Hanna gulped, looked down and took a step back, to give them a space. "I don't know how or when it all started. . .I just woke up one day, and realized my feelings have changed. Abbie found out somehow and I tried to distance myself from you, and the rest, you know how things went. I love you Chris, more than just a friend!" With that confession, Chris was left speechless. He tried to utter a word several times but nothing came out except his sombre face.

There was an intense silence as the two best friends stared one

another. Hanna was slightly trembling, while Chris had a blank face, unable to utter a word. Evidently, he was struggling on what to say. Upon realizing the ordeal, Hanna said;

"You don't have to say a word, I'm aware that you only see me as a friend. . . I only thought I had to tell you how I feel, for my own sake. Maybe I've just made you uncomfortable. . . I'm sorry!" With that, she walked past him and run away, covering her face with her palm, trying hard to hold her tears.

"Hanna wait! I--" he had to stop middle way since she'd already slipped his way. Extremely confused, he run a hand through his dark hair, sighing. He watched after her, until she disappeared.

CHAPTER 9

The night wasn't so great considering the state Chris woke up in, the next morning. He was a complete mess as if he couldn't get a wink of sleep.

"Seems like someone didn't sleep well, where you revising?" Carolyn asked him as they head outside, ready for school. Strangely he couldn't respond, his mind elsewhere. She scowled and decided to ignore. "Can I tag along in your car?" This time she made an eye contact

"Sure!" Somewhat startled, he replied. They hoped in, but instead of leaving, he kept staring at the sharing house direction.

"If you're waiting for Hanna she'd already left. I was surprised myself, it was too early. She didn't tell you?" Caro asked, eyes on her beloved brother who wasn't himself at all. "Did you fight again?"

"No we didn't. Can we go in peace? Without your interrogation?"

"Alright fine! No need to shout! Gosh!"

"I'm not!"

"Yeah. Right. Just don't let your mood swing gets in the way, you have exams, remember!" She told him, with much concern.

"I'll do fine. Don't worry!" He replied and off they left.

HANNA wasn't so good either. After flipping things over, she was afraid what Abbie said might come true; that she was about to lose even her friendship with Chris. She decided to wait and see. Hanna always knew how to deal with the odds, so despite everything, she tried to be as calm as possible for the remained exams which were to take two weeks, at most.

There was just one thing she couldn't handle at that moment; meeting Chris. She wasn't sure if talking to him after such a confession was a good idea, so she decided to avoid him once again, and she knew exactly how to make it possible.

Luckily, the plan was mutual, as at the end of that day, she got a text from Chris saying they should talk after exams. She read the message and threw the phone on the bed, before resuming her notes that were scattered all over the desk.

"Is everything okay with you?" Sarah, who was up-tying her hair asked.

"Yes mom. I'm just stressed with exams" Hanna replied, absentmindedly. Sarah looked at her for a long moment, as if she didn't buy the story.

"If you say so. I know you'll do well" she said and dived under the covers. "Good night!"

"Sleep tight mom!" Hanna told her, then leaned against the wooden-chair, wondering what could be going inside Chris's mind.

Finally the two weeks passed quickly than expected, just to realize finals were over and freshmen were the first to finish on that Friday afternoon. Hanna went straight home and found almost no one at the mansion. With her tummy growling, she head to the kitchen for some snacks. When done, she made her way out where she got face to face with Theresa who kept cracking the tiles with her long heels. Even at home she never lose a chance to be feminine and classy, unlike other women her age.

"You? Why are you lurking around here? I hope you didn't steal anything, because let me warn you, my son isn't here to save you!" Theresa said, sarcastically while scrolling her head to toe.

"I'm not a thief ma'am and you know that!" Hanna jumped, her fists clenched as if she was about to grab Theresa's ebony-hair but managed to calm down. She took a long breath together with a step back. Theresa was glaring at her, with a raised eyebrow. "I know you don't like me, even though I've done nothing wrong to you. It's understandable!"

"Oh, Is it?" Theresa queried, for once she seemed curious to hear the next part.

"Yes. It's all because I'm close to your son, but you don't have to worry, what you're thinking won't happen. Chris and I, are and will only be friends. I just hope you won't deny me that!" She stared her, with a pleading expression.

"Friends you say? And how do you expect me to believe that" Theresa asked, a sincere concern in her big eyes, which were directly glaring at Hanna.

She lowered hers, thoughtful for a while and replied, "Because it's the truth ma'am! Unfortunately, I do know my place. . .so rest assured, we're just friends!" It was a very painful declaration for Hanna. She loved Chris, and she knew that it was an impossible feeling to realize it's mutuality.

"Very well. I'll pretend I have your word!" Theresa said. However, she wasn't entirely convinced, but she decided to go with it. As a mother, she had greater expectations for his only son, and one of them was to see him married to the girl of the same social status, and Hanna wasn't even close to be the one.

"Well. . .excuse me!" Hanna said politely, and left.

* * * *

When she arrived inside the sharing house, she stopped by their tiny living room they barely used. It was as if her legs had suddenly lost their mobility. The talk she'd just had with Theresa stirred her up a little, but deep within, she was relieved with the fact that she'd somehow stopped her from breathing under her neck every time they met. She leaned against the worn-out cushion while tackling her blond-hair back, exhaustedly. In a minute, a voice came from behind her and destroyed the relaxing silence she was only starting to enjoy.

"Oh you scared me! I didn't know you're back!" Maria snapped, a hand on the heart side of her chest. Hanna quickly looked over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, I thought no one was in. . ." she retorted. "Speaking of my mom, have you seen her anywhere?"

"We have a day off, she mentioned meeting some friend?. . . and she'll be home late"

"A friend? That's strange!" Hanna said, thoughtfully. "Never mind, and where are you going so dolled up?" She stared at Maria who was finishing putting an earring on, looking all dressed-up.

She smiled widely, appreciating the compliment. "Out. And you should too! With Chris!" She whispered the last two words before walking past her, leaving only a trace of her cheap, yet nice-smelling perfume. "Don't forget to close the windows, I heard it's going to rain tonight" Maria added.

Hanna was stunned, unable to reply any of her remarks. Instead she just watched Maria leaving before she herself, made a way to the bedroom. She peeked at the sky through the window, and realized it was clear-blue, no sign of rain whatsoever. *What rain? This clumsy parrot!* Hanna thought while throwing herself on bed, and very fast, her mind was filled with other million thoughts.

She opened her backpack and took her cellphone out, intending to re-read the last text Chris sent her, just to find another one sent few minutes ago. It read; ***I'm on my way home,***

let's meet at the lake in an hour. P.S, I won't leave until I see you. She finished reading and her heart was racing like crazy, but one thing was for sure, she didn't regret confessing her feelings even though she was very much aware on what to expect.

Some time passed by, Hanna couldn't control her nervous outburst; but at last she made her mind. Within ten minutes she approached the lake, and from a little farther she could see Chris, seated on the bench with his earphones on as if he was eternally married to them. At that moment her pulse went out of order, with a little coloured sun-rays that hit her eyes, she almost couldn't move. She stalled for a minute, as if she was about to run away, but immediately braced herself and moved on. She found him quietly staring at the calm water while obviously listening to his melancholic music that he so much liked. Without making any haste noise, Hanna took a seat next to Chris. He turned to her, instantly.

"I thought you wouldn't come!" Chris snapped, while removing the pieces from his ear, with a pensive look.

"Well you thought wrong. Here I am Chris" Hanna replied, not as enthusiastic as she usually talked when around him. He frowned, unpleasant of the coldness in her blue-gray eyes.

"Hanna I--"

"Chris I--"

They both spoke at the same time, and surprisedly they stared each other, then laughed. For some reason it helped to reduce

the tension as Chris suggested, "You go first!"

"Uh-- okay!" She agreed, then sighed. "Well, I wanted to say that. . .about the thing I told you that night, that I--" she was stammering, as if it was the hardest topic than the Calculus that she despised.

"That you love me?" He helped her, but it was more of a mockery considering the mischievous smirk on the corner of his lips.

"Yes. That. Well, what I'm trying to say is. . . can you pretend I didn't say anything? I mean, I don't want things to be this awkward between us, I still want you as my friend. I'll take care of my feelings and. . . and that kiss, let's say it was just a mistake! So can we forget about all that, please?" She was glaring at him, and Chris was pretty surprised with everything she said, he was almost disappointed. While still in shock, Hanna added "Look, I never meant to let you find out about it, I don't even know what came into me at that day, I don't want you to have another image of me. . .maybe I'm being shameless by asking you this, but please don't break our friendship, you're my only friend Chris". She waited for his reply which took almost a minute.

"Wow! That was. . . so unexpected!" He snapped, before getting up, with Hanna's eyes following him. "So, are you done? Can I talk now?" He asked, politely.

"Sure, go ahead" she nodded. He took his time, pacing a bit, his one arm folded across his chest, the other holding up his chin, thoughtful of his next move. He abruptly returned his gaze

towards her, looking at her so intensely.

"Okay Hanna, first of all, I don't understand how you can change so quickly but I'll pretend I do. . . although, I refuse to pretend you didn't say anything" he declared. "And also, that kiss was never a mistake, at least not to me!" He said with much serene and seriousness, that made Hanna leave the bench quickly and stood up her feet.

"What does that suppose to mean Chris?" She questioned him, hesitantly, her heart pounding even faster than it already was. With their glimmering eyes locking, Chris took a step closer, and cupped her face with his palms. She shuddered. "Chris, what are you--" before she could add another word, he reached her lips and kissed her slowly, for almost a minute then pulled away, his hands still on hold of her.

"Did that answer your question?" He lazily asked. "I don't know if this is what they call love. As my crazy sister always says, I may be very smart but yet so dumb when comes to women" he told her, and she was as red as a tomato, without leaving behind the shocked look in her eyes.

"I. . .uh. . . I mean, does this mean you--"

"It means, what I feel for you is special, something I've never felt for any other girl before. And it's more than what a friend should feel. Hanna, I'm not as certain as you are that it's love, but I'm willing to explore whatever this feeling may be! Can you be a little patient with me? Until I'm able to say I love you too?" He asked, and like an idiot Hanna nodded fast. She was so

happy that it mattered less, as long as he had confessed to be feeling something more than a simple friendship. Her lips slowly turned into a smile that became contiguous. "But, I don't think I can wait to taste those lips again? Can we make an exception?"

"Chris!" Hanna tried to walk away, embarrassed, but it was too late since he grabbed her and pressed her body against his firm torso. "No, we can't--" Once again she was too late, he'd already taken control of her, as if he'd waited forever for that. He kissed her tenderly that she could no longer resist his charm. With her arms on his shoulders she closed her eyes to savour the delicious taste of his lips, the one she'd dreamed of for a very long while. Her mind was totally overwhelmed with such unexpected event that took a new turn in her life.

As they say, enjoy while it lasts. Upon recalling the little chat she had with Theresa earlier that day, Hanna immediately detached her self from his arms, looking completely spanked out.

"What? You didn't like it?" Chris asked with a surprise from her reaction. Hanna returned to the bench, unable to contain her uneasiness. He slowly joined her, then took her hands in his, worried this time. "I'm sorry! I shouldn't have forced you into a kiss, especially since I'm not too sure of myself!"

"No Chris. It's not about the kiss"

"No? Then what is it?"

"It's about the promise I made to your mother!" She snapped, but that made him way more confused. She gave him all the

details, but surprisingly he just laughed. "You think it's funny?" Fiercely she pulled her hands.

"Of course it is. I mean why did you tell her such a thing? Oh my mother! when will she realize that I'm no longer his little boy that needs to be looked after?"

"Well, how would I know that things would've turned out this way"

"I think you made a haste move, I mean after confessing, shouldn't one wait for an answer first? I didn't give you any and yet you made your own conclusion!" He said, in a reprimanding way.

"Right. Rub it on my face! I should've known that the mighty Ashton Jr has some feelings for his friend. How convenient!" She rolled her eyes, annoyed.

"That's because she's not just a friend. She's my best friend, Hanna, a very special girl!" His voice became hoarse while telling her those melting words, and she blushed. "Don't worry about Theresa, I'll take care of her! She's not as hard as everyone thinks!"

"You think she'll understand? I'm just a maid's daughter Chris, I'm not like Abigail"

"We'll figure it out" He pulled her into a tight hug, and stayed like that for moments, until they realized the sky was dark, with the strong wind brushing the trees. While staring around the rain drops hit them and immediately it turned into a heavy rain.

"Damn! We can't make it to the mansion, follow me!" Without explaining he grabbed her hand and run to their secret den.

"Do you even have the keys?" Hanna shouted, it was too noisy already.

"Let's see" he slipped through his pockets. Luckily, he had them, they entered quickly as soon as he opened the gate.

Once inside, they stifled a laugh; running under the rain was a hilarious scene to ignore, they were both drenched. "I can't believe Maria was right! She told me it was going to rain"

"And you ignored her!" Chris replied, he appeared with an old towel in his hand. Hanna untied her wet hair, allowed then to flow under her shoulders, it gave her a brand new look that almost left Chris's jaw on the floor.

"Do you think it'll stop anytime soon?" She asked but there was no response. "Chris-- Chris are you listening?" She snapped.

"Hah-- I'm not sure! Perhaps it may take a while. Let's just sit and wait!" He suggested, they closed the door and rested on the sofa. He figured how drenched Hanna was and decided to help her.

"Thank you" She smiled. He started drying up her hair and their faces met. There was an irresistible attraction, with their gaze on each other. There was no more voice, except of their heart beating, the melodious rain that cracked the roof and the desire burning inside their young bodies. "Why are you looking at me

like that?" She managed to make a sound after making an effort.

"Because you're so enchanting and unique! Just like the first time I saw you at the airport, with your hair falling, you were so beautiful, until you started talking. . . I said hell no, she's just a punk!" He laughed, and she slapped him softly. "Okay okay! I take it back! But really, I'm only thinking of one thing right now!" His tone changed to a husky one.

"What-- what is it?" Hanna asked, her voice shaking, with her hormones racing at the speed of a light. She swallowed hard, feeling the butterflies in her stomach as Chris leaned over to her face. She closed her eyes just to hear a whisper in her ear.

"Exactly what you're imagining" he told her, before staring deeply into her eyes, with the closing distance, witnessing her lips trembling. He lifted a finger and stroked her hair, while brushing her skin softly. He then kissed her at the corner of her mouth; It made her exhaling audibly. He continued showering her with kisses, and caresses beneath her wet T-shirt. She slowly lied down on the sofa, while he run his hand down to her stomach, playfully while making the most of the falling audience of the rain outside. He stopped, and only concentrated on staring at her, while brushing her massive hair behind her ears. She was gasping, and so was he. "I don't want you to think I'm taking advantage of the situation Hanna, if you don't want, we can stop here"

"No. Don't!" She replied quickly, the reaction forced a smile out of him. "I'm just a little scared!"

"Scared? Why?"

"Well, it's-- no it's nothing! I want to be with you now!" She snapped and pulled his face to kiss him; it was she who was in the hurry this time. Without talking more, she removed his shirt and stared at his firm body in a tantalizing manner. The same features that she used to see during their workout routine but right there they felt more spicy and magnetic. It was as if all the emotions exploded at once, they soon became one and enjoyed the rest of the forbidden desire.

Some time later.

"Are you okay?" Chris asked. They both were lying on the floor mattress, covered with the blanket, Hanna's head on his chest.

"More than I could ever be!" She replied. He laid a soft kiss on her forehead.

"Was that your first time?" He hesitantly asked.

"No. It's wasn't" she jumped to deny.

"Of course it was!"

"I said it it wasn't"

"Fine. But I'm sure it was!" He insisted while laughing at her embarrassed face.

"No, it wasn't! Just when will this rain end?" She diverted his attention.

"I don't know. And I don't care, it can last for as long as it can be. That way we can. . ."

"Don't even start Chris! I'm going to sleep!"

It couldn't stop raining that night, and whether intentionally or not, they spent the night there, and it was full of passion. None of the two had ever foresighted such a day. The following morning, which felt more of a calm after the storm, there was a knock at the gate. It was all strange since no one else knew of their secret hide-out, plus, it was nothing but an abandoned house. Hanna was the first one to get up, she woke Chris up.

"Who could it be?" Chris wondered. "Wait here, I'll go check!" He reached for his clothes and she did the same.

"Chris what if it's your mother? God, I'm so dead!"

"Hey, relax! It can't be her, and even if it is, I'll tell her what's going on!" He kissed her forehead and gave the reassuring smile, which wasn't enough to calm her nerves as the bangs outside continued.

CHAPTER 10

Carolyn realized that Chris didn't return home at night, even though his car was parked outside, which meant that he did get home after school. When Theresa asked her if she knew where her brother was, she had to lie that he'd slept over at his friend's.

"I hate it when he turns his cellphone off, and that without informing us anything" Theresa snapped, still in her elegant night robe. She wasn't agreeable with her son's sleeping out. Without any further argument, she walked out of Caro's room.

Once alone, Carolyn got dressed and quickly run to the sharing house. She knocked twice when Maria opened the door. It was still early considering the weather and the color of the sky which indicated the rain wasn't over yet.

"Hi Caro! I'm very sorry I'm late, I forgot Sarah isn't here and she's the one who--"

"Wait, Nanny Sarah is not here?" Caro asked, a little surprised.

"Yes, I guess with that heavy rain, she couldn't return last night. But I'm sure she'll be here soon, you know how responsible she is!" Maria replied.

"And Hanna? Where is she?" A bit hesitantly, Caro asked, a worried look on her face.

"Probably sleeping. . ." replied Maria. Caro was already heading to Hanna's room just to find it empty, still tidy-up, as if no one used it. "Huh, where could she be? I thought she was in, do you

think she slept out?" As always, Maria's imagination started running wild, her mouth wide open.

"She must've left early, I think she had something to do in college!" Caro said, while leaving the room. It was more of a divergence to distract her, however, it didn't seem to work.

Maria insisted, "I don't think so. I'm sure she didn't sleep in, I mean look at the bed, its like--"

"MARIA! I said she left early! Early this morning, get it?" Caro shouted, insistingly, with arched eyebrows.

"Ah-- yes! She left early!" Maria grinned nervously.

"That's what I thought. Now, you better get ready and prepare breakfast, you don't want Theresa to skin you alive, do you?"

I just hope it's not what I'm thinking, caro thought as her legs led her outside the mansion. The ground was wet, as the morning dew fell from the tree branches. She knew exactly where to find the two.

She reached at the lake, and eyed the small house for a minute. She eventually made up her mind and walked over, then knocked the old metal-gate. Chris emerged from inside and came face to face with her. Completely dumbstruck, he fixed his T-shirt which was apparently, inside-out but failed to hide the shock in his eyes.

"Caro? What are you doing here?" He asked his sister, who wasn't too happy to see him in such a manner, and he caught on.

He swung the get open. "Um-- listen Caro I--" way before he could explain, she brushed past him and started heading inside. Hanna showed herself right away.

She stood there, embarrassed, her plunging gaze towards the siblings.

"So this is it? Huh?" With a cold glare, Caro snapped. "How could you? I mean. . . this is outrageous, you spent the night together? In here?"

"Caro please, we can explain. . ." Hanna tried to reason with her; she'd never seen her as mad as she was that morning, and for some reasons, Hanna understood her.

Immediately, Chris stepped in, running a hand through his hair and said, "I think you're overreacting a bit. We're grown up adults and we haven't done anything wrong here."

"Chris!" Hanna nudged him, as a way to refrain him from making the matter worse.

"Exactly my point! You're adults, so you must know very well what the word responsibility means. . . and don't worry dear brother, I'm not planning on interfering with your little affair, I just hope you know what you're doing. I came to warn you, everyone is looking for you, so you better hurry back home!" Caro said to them, before turning her slippers, but after two steps she halted and added, "Maybe you should fix yourselves a bit more, with how you look, anyone can tell what you've been up to the whole night. . . I'm so disappointed Chris, and even more in you Hanna, I thought you were different!" With those

words, Chris almost lunged towards her, but Hanna grabbed his wrist, even though the remark didn't leave her indifferent.

"Caro, I know you can't understand us right now, but I'm sure you will. It's a shame that you think ill of me just because of my feelings for your brother" Hanna said, hands still locked with Chris's, together they exchanged a meaningful glance and there was a beautiful sparkle between the two of them. Caro stared at the pair, wryly, and left. Hanna looked up at Chris, "I'm sure Caro was surprised, that's all. . . But she's right, why don't you fix your T-shirt first"

"That goes to you too, I think it's best you tie up this beautiful hair of yours" he pinched the tip of her nose, before heading in, like newlyweds.

At early afternoon of the same day, Caro entered her brother's room with a food tray.

"Here is your lunch, eat or don't, it's up to you!" She placed it on top of his bed-side table and turned her toes. Chris was sitting in front of his computer, as he watched his frowning sister leaving.

"Caro. . ." he made a move but she was still adamantly trying to ignore him. "Caro that's enough. Won't you ever talk to me again?" He rose to his feet.

"And why not? You do what you want, can't I do the same? I have a right to sulk too!" She barked. Chris looked at her for a long while, and his lips stretched into irresistible smile. His

sister's little tantrum reminded him of their childhood somehow. "Oh, so you think it's funny now, don't you?" She was even more frustrated.

"Caro hold on. Please!" This time he got a hold of her hand. "I'm sorry! You know I'd never hide anything from you, not intentionally" he managed to regain her attention, from the look of her starry face.

She sighed. "That's what I use to think too. But how can you explain what I saw today? With that, FRIEND of yours" she said, sarcastically, while slowly pacing towards the couch at the corner of his room. Chris threw himself on bed, and leaned over the pair of pillows. "Chris I'm not angry because you were together, You know I like Hanna and even if you're really dating her, I'd support you. . . but you fooled me, you made everyone believe that you're only friends, and finding out like that, I felt betrayed!"

"Oh little sister, forgive me. I swear none of that was prearranged." He vaguely explained how things happened until their relationship status changed in such a short time, and the reason why they spent the night out, without going into much details. Caro's face heightened, as if the story was so exhilarating to the ears. She quickly changed seats to the wheeled office chair and moved closer to her brother.

"No, I can't believe this! Is that why you two stopped talking during exams? So, tell me, other than kissing, what else happened?" Caro asked, with this wild air that made Chris immediately stand up.

"Um. . .that-- you'll have to forgive me Carolyn, I don't think we're that close enough for me to give you such intimate details. I'm your brother, not your BFF, Okay?" He walked past her, and reached for a food tray. There was a smirk on his face that expressed what he was thinking at that moment.

"Argh! Okay" she pouted, disappointedly. She jumped to her brother's bed and lied down, watching him sipping his lukewarm tea. She had plenty of questions. "Do you love her?"

That almost choked him. "Caro! That's one hell of a question" he snapped.

"Not at all, it's a very simple one. I know how impulsive you can get when starting a relationship, I've seen it with your previous girls and Abbie too, the poor thing. But I don't want you to make another mistake, for Hanna's sake, and yours, because I know you won't forgive yourself if you ever hurt her. So?" She gave her brother a hard time, because in reality she was right. If anything were to go wrong in that affair, it's Hanna who was to suffer from it. Seeing him beating himself, as if unsure of which way to take, Caro said, "Hey, it's alright. Take your time, think through it carefully. There has to be clue somewhere, deep inside that clueless heart! But if you ask me, I think you're crazy in love with Hanna! I mean. . .you even shared a night with her you naughty boy!"

"Shut it Caro!" He shouted, trying to get rid of her spunkiness. Knowing her, he'd never hear the end of it.

While laughing they got interrupted by a familiar, yet so very

scary voice by the door.

"YOU SLEPT WITH HER? That little low life servant of a girl? You Chris?" Theresa snapped, her voice as cracking as a thunder, they both glared at her surprisedly.

* * * *

Back at the sharing house, Hanna was sitting beside her bed, very anxious of what was going to be next. She hugged her feet, and placed her chin on the knees, when she heard the bang at the door. Wondering who might be, she head out to open, and came in close contact with Theresa, whose face was as dark as the moonless night. Without saying a word, she slapped Hanna hardly on the face.

"MOM!" Chris shouted, and walked between them, followed by Carolyn who seemed quite terrified. "Stop this mom! Stop meddling with my life! Hanna, are you okay?" He turned to face her, she was still holding her left side cheek.

"Get out of here Christian! Don't make me forget that you're my damn son" Theresa snapped, her gaze cold like an Atlantic iceberg. He didn't bat, he was still glued to Hanna, extremely worried about her.

"Go Chris, leave us alone" Hanna finally spoke, although the

contents left Chris a little perplexed. He frowned, but she insisted, through her eyes, that he so well understood. He let out a resigned sigh, and stepped aside. It was just Theresa glaring at her, viciously.

"I knew you're nothing but a simple opportunist! But still, I thought for once I could trust you after we talked yesterday. And what did you do? You're such a hooker, just like your mother. Well, I guess a fruit never falls far from a tree!" She spouted such words with contempt as Hanna swallowed hard, obviously hurt by her piercing insults. On other hand, she knew it wasn't entirely wrong, she was partly responsible for such a ruckus.

"Please ma'am, don't involve my mother in this. I may be everything you say, but there's one truth you don't know" with eyes lingering with tears, she said. "I love Chris. And making such a promise to you, was the worst mistake of my life" she finally gathered the courage to tell the truth, which in turn made Theresa even more furious.

She paced over and said, "Love? Did you just say love? Don't make me laugh. You know, I don't understand how you managed to seduce my son. . . but you're a piece of trash, not in a million years I'd let someone like you be my son's girlfriend!" Theresa's face was ablaze, and Hanna wasn't indifferent. With her fists clenched, she exhaled softly, trying to control her nerves.

"Well, that's for him to decide, don't you think?" She replied, calmly while looking her in the eyes. "I know to you I'm not good enough for him, but can't you try to understand my feelings?"

You're also a woman ma'am, I'm not interested in your family name or anything, I just love him, and I think he has a right to choose on his own!"

"Don't you dare lecture me! Remember you're in my house, and I can throw you out in a second. . . Listen to me good, you either end things with Christian, or get ready to leave this house for good, and that includes your mother" Theresa snarled. It was almost a threat, and for some reasons It got to Hanna as a slim sweat fell her tempo. "Oh, and it's not a warning, it's a promise" She added and turned around, when her eyes came across Sarah, who was glaring at her like a statue.

"Don't worry Theresa, I'll be glad to leave this house!" She replied. There was a skeptical reaction from Theresa as the unexpected happened.

She quickly resumed her composure with a raised eyebrow. "Great! Why don't you start packing then? Seems like being a tramp runs in your blood, or what? Don't tell me you didn't know that your daughter spent the night with a man and yet you're so calm!"

"And that man is none other than your son, who's how old again?" Said Sarah, sarcastically. "It doesn't matter. . . I just don't get why my daughter is the only one to blame, did she put a pill on his drink and made him sleep with her?" Sarah's words left all of them in shock, even Chris and Caro who'd just returned were surprised. How and when Sarah learned everything, no one knew, maybe except Maria who remained pensive as she also appeared.

"How dare you!" Theresa furiously tried to raise a hand but his son quickly stopped her.

"Mom please! stop embarrassing yourself" Chris pleaded in a low voice.

Sarah quipped, "Hush, Theresa! There's a limit for everything. And don't worry, I know how cunning you are, getting rid of the people you don't like is a piece of cake" it was the first time anyone seeing her so angry. This time Hanna had to calm her mother but the efforts were in vain. Caro was just at the corner, feeling so ashamed of her mother's scandal that she always hated. "No kids, you step aside. This is between Theresa and I, yes, THERESA! Why? Are you offended that I'm calling you by your first name?

Bewildered, Theresa slipped out of his son's grip, then laughed cynically. "Are you drunk Sarah? How could a simple maid--You know, I don't care. You're fired!"

"Of course! So typical of you. You always find a way to get rid of what you can't handle! Isn't that what you did to Martin?" Without realizing, Sarah spoke of something forbidden for quite a long time, something that aroused everyone's curiosity.

"Shut up you lousy woman! How dare you mention that name?" Theresa barked, already at Sarah's throat. Luckily Chris was the most interested one on the subject.

He butt in quickly with dismay. "Wait, what are you talking about?" He asked, and both ladies went silent. "I'm talking to you? Nanny Sarah? Mom? You mentioned John's father? By any

chance do you know something about their sudden disappearance?" He turned to his mother who seemed a little nervous, so unlike her, and then to Sarah with her partly-regretful face.

"No Chris. But perhaps your mother does. Hanna, let's go" She beckoned her daughter to head in after stirring things up. Hanna threw a small glance at Chris who seemed completely lost, and Theresa took a chance to sneak away as if none of it involved her. In fact, she asked Maria to tell the driver to prepare a car.

"Mom, you can't leave without explaining things? John was my friend, so--"

"I don't have anything to explain! If you decided to defy me and hook up with that low life, don't expect me to satisfy your childish tantrums . . . I don't owe you any explanation! Now if you'll excuse me, I need a new air!" She shoved him off and walked to the car. No word could explain Chris's face as he watched Theresa leaving. He always strived to find the answer as to why and where John and his father left that night, and all of a sudden, he got a glimpse about it, and he was willing to go all the way to find the truth.

"This isn't over mom, I know you're hiding something!" he thought out loudly.

THAT day became the worst for almost everyone. It was crazy how things could flip in such a short moment. Just a night before,

they were happy as if lived in a fairy world, and yet it all ended like a passing shadow.

Hanna was inside their bedroom, when her mother stomped in like a hurricane. She glared at her for quite a while before asking her to pack up their things.

"What? You can't be serious mom!" Hanna snapped, startled.

"Oh yes young Lady, I'm very serious. And I don't think you have any right to complain" Sarah replied with a determined look, started to walk out, then hesitated. "And one more thing, I'm not going to ask what you did when you slept out. So, you shouldn't question my decisions either"

She sounded like a different person, a resentful woman. But Hanna understood that she was hurt and disappointed. Still, it wasn't appealing for her to leave the mansion; she wasn't willing to end things up with Chris before they could even start. With her puzzled reaction, she wandered her hand, searching for her cellphone that wasn't anywhere to be found.

After rummaging everywhere, she suddenly remembered that she must've left it to the secret den. A bit sluggishly, she braced herself and walked to the door, just to realize it was locked from outside, obviously her mother's doing. Feeling more dejected, Hanna fell on her feet, tucked up and leaned on her knees. It was as if something had possessed her usually well-reserved mother, and her intuition kept telling her that it wasn't only because of the incident, even Sarah's night out was a little mysterious.

She had to spend the rest of the afternoon indoors, and the only thought dominated her mind was her relationship with Chris which was at the moment in a great danger. And what's worse was the fact that she wasn't even able to talk him up until then. After the long wait, finally there was someone at the door, Maria. Hanna was relieved when she stepped in.

"Oh girl, I can't believe Sarah is doing this" maria settled her pitying eyes on her as she said this.

"How is she? Is she still mad at me?" Hanna asked, after standing up fast.

"Yeah. . . She isn't talking to anyone apparently. I'm worried, what if she's serious about leaving?" With such remark, Hanna became more perplexed and tense. Leaving was the last thing she needed. "I suppose you haven't spoken to Chris yet, Oh God I don't know what's wrong with everyone today. Actually, I've seen him a while ago with--"

"Where? I've got to meet him. Right now!"

"Uh. . .okay. He was heading to the garden and--"

"Please cover-up for me Maria. . .I won't take long" with a thankful smile, Hanna run off. Even though there was a worried look on Maria's face as she bit her nail.

She run to the garden as fast as the pace of her heartbeat, with a bright smile on her face, while deep inside praying not to bump into her mother who wasn't so friendly then. In a minute she arrived and her smile broadened when she caught a glimpse

of Chris's back at the pavilion. He seemed lost in the night clouds, as if counting the stars. Hanna watched him, with sparkling eyes; despite all the charade of that day, she still had the audacity to wonder if it was she on his mind. She found the idea absurd and crazy, but yet thrilling. She shook her head to do away such embarrassing thoughts while blushing and made her way forwards.

That's when she saw Chris walking to the other side where a slender woman who seemed very familiar was standing with crossed arms. He slowly hugged her from behind and she was completely melting in his arms as she turned around and hugged him even tighter. Hanna's heart sunk in a second, her arms dropped and even her feet started trembling as they moved backward. It was Abigail, when and how she got back to the mansion wasn't in question at the time. The only thing in Hanna's mind was them together in such intimate posture. Tears fell from her eyes as if stabbed in the heart. It was a feeling of betrayal; even if what they'd just shared wasn't serious, it still hurt.

CHAPTER 11

"I'm done packing. We are still leaving, aren't we?" Hanna asked her mother as soon as she returned. This time she was the one eager to leave the Ashton's mansion. There was an aggressiveness in her tone that Sarah couldn't quite understand.

"Yes, first thing tomorrow morning. Did something happen? You don't look well" Sarah stared at her in a good while, but she only received silence, in return. "Look Hanna, I'm not doing this to hurt you dear. . .on the contrary, I don't want you to get hurt, your relationship with him will only bring you pain. I don't want the history to repeat itself."

"Are you saying that from your own experience?" At last she'd softened, curiously looking at her mother, who was vividly exhausted and worn-off in just one day.

Sarah slowly sat next to her, and took her hands into hers. "Yes. These kind of love stories, don't have good ending honey. Chris is a very good kid, but his mother isn't, and from what I know, Theresa has the upper hand, she always gets what she wants!"

As if mentioning of his name stirred Hanna up, she immediately pulled away and stood up, sniffing. "Don't worry mother. We're leaving tomorrow and it's only because I want to." She gathered some courage and returned her face to look at her, then forced a smile. "I'm going to sleep now, good night"

That was somewhat weird. Sarah detected something unusual in Hanna's eyes that kept disturbing her, but she got mixed up

when Maria showed up with tears, begging her to reconsider.

As planned, they left early the next day. Up until then, they both couldn't believe what had just happened. It was a quick and sudden decision, and more painful for Hanna who couldn't stop staring back the clearly familiar road to the lake that she knew by heart. Irresistibly, she wiped away her tears and swallowed hard, before trying to get some sleep after a long restless night. She wanted to forget everything, especially her one-sided love that failed miserably, and mostly important the scene that kept replaying in her head, of Abbie in Chris's embrace. Sarah looked at her from the front seat of the taxi, feeling guilty. In spite of all the chaos, she felt strange that Hanna never asked where they were going, as if she was running away more than voluntarily leaving.

After a long three hours drive, the taxi pulled over in front of a beautiful house and dropped all their languages. Hanna was completely stunned as they took off.

"Why are we stopping here mom?" She finally asked.

"Took you long enough, help me with the bag" Sarah replied while pushing the largest suitcase to the entrance. The house was very quiet, in a quite small neighborhood, outside the city, yet she looked quite comfortable and familiar with it.

"Mom? You're not answering my question! Whose house is this?" Hanna insisted, determined.

"It's your house!" Sarah replied, exhaustedly. There was a

pause. "Yes. Your father bought you this house. Now, can we go in?" Without waiting for an answer, she opened the door and walked in.

"What? Wait, my father? But I thought you haven't seen him in years! Mom?. . . Mom?" She took the rest of the bags and followed her, despite the sign that she wasn't up for the discussion. "Mom? Have you been seeing each other in secret? But father is married, How could--"

"Stop it Hanna! Respect me! What are you insinuating, huh?" Sarah turned viciously as if she was about to swallow her alive, very pissed by her indecent remark. "Yes, he managed to find me some months ago and offered this house, which I rejected of course, I didn't want anything from him; I told him we were fine" she slowly took a seat at the nearest modern couch, thoughtful as her mind drifted away.

"Forgive me mother, I didn't mean to offend you. I know what a remarkable woman you are, I'm so sorry!" Sincerely apologetic, Hanna embraced her mother who smiled softly.

"It's okay. Maybe I should have told you about this, but I didn't want you to get mixed up in the situation" Sarah told her tenderly.

Hanna nodded before stepping aside and asked, "Then what made you change your mind then? About the house!"

"I just thought about it carefully and realized it was just my pride, because you're entitled to have anything he can offer, he's still your father after all, so I gave him a call and accepted. I

didn't know we would need it so soon" she replied as they both stared around that shiny living room. "I hope you don't resent me for separating you from Chris. . . I always knew you had special feelings for him, and I was also aware that nothing good would come out of it" she suddenly changed the subject which turned Hanna very tense.

"No mom. You didn't separate us, it was only a matter of time before we part our ways! I'm glad the timing was perfect!" She replied, vaguely.

"I don't get it, what do you mean?"

"Nothing. Can we unpack now? I also want a house tour! God, it's so nice to have a rich father huh?" She got up with extra enthusiasm that left Sarah a little worried, about her sudden change of attitude towards Chris.

* * * *

At the Ashton's mansion, things were quite over-the-edge when they discovered that Hanna and Sarah had left. Even Theresa, who seemed enthralled about the idea of kicking them out, was a little taken a back. It wasn't such a good morning, especially for Chris who couldn't utter a word than walking to his room completely dejected.

"Maria, for God's sake! you must know something, tell me where did they go?" Carolyn kept pressuring Maria without any success.

"I don't know Caro, believe me. Sarah refused to tell me anything. I'm sorry I didn't warn you about it" she replied.

Caro sighed heavily, her two hands on her waist, still confused.

"Alright, you can go! But please, let me know in case one of them calls you. okay?"

"Okay" she nodded.

The way everything happened was like a bad dream in one night while hoping that it would all be fine once eyes opened. Caro head straight to her brother's room and stormed in without knocking. Surprisingly, she found him busy tuned on his laptop, watching his Alvin episodes. A bit fiercely, She walked over and closed the door behind, before shooting him a cold gaze

"Seriously? With everything that's happening you still have time to watch your stupid chipmunks?" She scolded him like a baby.

Chris stared at him with a resigned look, as if he was least interested. "Caro, I'm begging you, please, leave me alone. I had a very terrible night so I thought I'd at least have a peaceful morning which you're in fact starting to ruin" he answered with an ice cold tone of voice.

"Oh Chris, come on now. . . stop pretending like you don't care because I know you do. Tell me, are you sure Hanna didn't mention anything at all?" She insisted without realizing that it was making matters even worse considering the frown on his face.

"Damn it! this is so annoying! Do you have to mention her name every time we talk?" The electrifying voice startled Caro as she stepped aside. The anger in Chris's face wasn't normal; he was usually restrained "Fine, if it'll make you leave me alone I'll tell you. I spent the whole night trying to call her so that we can talk, I sent her bunch of texts but she ignored them all. Like an idiot I kept trying until her phone went off. And then I found out they have left. So, what do you want me to do? Search the whole Lycos for a pair of perfectly normal adults who willingly decided to leave? Or should I go to the airport and stop the plane in case they decide to leave for Sydney. Caro, give me a break, I don't care who comes or leaves this house from now on, so go on and pester someone else" he screamed at her non-stop that she found herself at the edge of his bed, with eyes open.

"Uh--Okay. I get it. I'm sorry!" For once Caro decided to give in, she knew he was very hurt, especially because it was a second time people close to him disappeared without saying anything. He was devastated without knowing how to take it. "Well. . .are you going to take Abbie to the airport then?"

"Of course I will. She's taking an afternoon flight. And please try to be nice to her for the time being, she's going through a very bad time" At last the pitch of his voice returned to normal as he comfortably continued with his cartoon.

"Don't worry. I can't imagine the pain of losing a father but I'm sure she must be suffering" Caro said, but it was as if she was talking to a wall, because Chris was already miles away in his own thoughts regardless of his fixed gaze on the screen. And

obviously he wasn't thinking of Abigail who'd just lost her father.

After Caro's departure, he immediately closed the laptop and lied on bed, facing the ceiling. Several question were running in his head without letting his usual calm face. Deep inside he was hoping to hear his cellphone ring and hear something from Hanna, even a little excuse for leaving him without saying goodbye. But minutes passed and even hours, yet he got nothing.

* * * *

As for Hanna, she tried to spend her day productively by helping her mother cleaning and arranging things in their new home which by far was like a dream. They had a busy moment until early evening when Sarah made them some noodles.

"Oh thank God, I was starving!" Hanna rushed over and grabbed her bowl as Sarah stared at her for a few seconds. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

She smirked and replied, "What happened Hanna? I know you're hiding something and it has to do with Chris?" She finally tackled her.

"Nothing happened. I only decided to use my head instead of my heart. Isn't that what you wanted?" Hanna answered, aggressively.

"But I thought after what you both shared, you'd at least try to

call him and--"

"Mother, please stop. I'm already ashamed of what I did so can you just. . .not add to it? Chris and I were just friends, what happened wasn't suppose to happen" she cried.

"But you like him more than that, no?"

"It doesn't matter. Not anymore"

With that their conversation ended. As a mother, Sarah felt her daughter's pain, but had no idea on how to console her. The time they spent apart, unable to watch her growing up, made it hard for them to have an intimate chat, not even once, and that left her a little sad as she watched Hanna walking to her new bedroom.

As if her mother's questions rekindled all the anguish, Hanna fell to her bed and started sobbing once again. It all came at once; the stormy night she shared with him, the kisses, the promising words, everything came back to her mind. It was all so beautiful, she thought. But seeing him in Abbie's arms again, under the moonlight like two longing lovers, was something she couldn't forgive. *I'll forget you Christian Ashton, I swear I will*, she thought out loudly and very determined she got up and wiped her tears away.

Several days passed, trying to adjust to their new life. With much difficulties, Hanna managed to live those days without giving much thoughts on the past. But one day she remembered

the story about that childhood friend of Chris that connects Theresa in some strange ways.

"Mother, what really happened to John and his father? The ones you spoke of when you confronted Theresa?" Hanna decided to dig the mystery. Sarah refused to answer. "Oh mom! It's just us here, it's not like I'm gonna tell anyone, I can't believe you don't trust me"

"Look who's talking! Aren't you the one hiding things from me? Anyway, it's a long story but--" Sarah paused a second, as they both sat comfortably at the kitchen counter. Hanna's eyes totally fixed on her. "Martin was a family driver, specifically Theresa's since Mr. Ashton is always away from home"

"Wait, Martin is John's father, right?" Hanna butt in and her mother nodded. "Then what?" She was so eager to hear the story as if expecting it to be the most juicy scoop.

"Well, he was a good man, very hardworking and all. . .but there was a rumor at the time that he was involved with Theresa"

"What? No, I can't picture that tyrant woman having an affair with the driver! Really?" She chuckled.

"Will you let me finish girl? I never said that. . . and I'm not sure if it's true or not, but what I'm sure of is that he was crazy for her, he would do anything to please the lady. And Theresa used that to her advantage"

It was hard to quite understand what Sarah implied, regardless,

Hanna was patient enough to let her mother continue narrating the story. It appeared that one day Theresa had a fist quarrel with her husband, and to take it all out she took a car and drove away. That's when she knocked someone over; fortunately it wasn't fatal, although he suffered some injuries. Surprisingly, Martin took the blame, claiming he was the one driving the car, he voluntarily confessed to the police.

"Why? Do you think Theresa made him do it?" With much curiosity, Hanna queried.

"Maybe or maybe not. People in love can do stupid things sometimes. I don't know how, but James found out and like everyone else, he started having doubts. Everything got settled regarding the accident, and the next day, Martin was fired"

"By Mr. Ashton?"

"No. By Theresa. And after that, things changed, I think something happened, because their marriage was almost over and James left home for a very long time"

"Gosh! What a witch. . .no wonder Mr. Ashton doesn't stay at the mansion for long, well, despite his job. And there Chris thinks his father is irresponsible, how awful!" Hanna said, almost sadly, Sarah eyed her sideways.

During that time, Hanna and her mother continued bonding well. It was like life had just begun. With each other's support, things weren't so hard, and slowly they got used to their simple life.

After receiving her severance pay from Mr. Ashton, Sarah decided it was about time that she opened her own small restaurant since cooking was the only thing she was best at. Hanna was very enthusiastic about the idea, especially since that town was popular with tourists, having a local restaurant was a grand thought. They immediately started to make plans.

Few weeks passed by, and there was no contact to nor from Chris; Hanna tried so hard to let go of him despite all the haunting memories that kept her awake at times in the night. Even that one morning she woke up feeling so exhausted and rushed to the kitchen for some water.

"Are you okay?" Sarah who was already doing her chores asked.

"I'm fine. I just couldn't sleep well" she replied, before opening the fridge.

"Why? Were you thinking of school? Or someone named Chris?" Sarah teased and made her frown.

"No. None of them. I think I'm having an upset stomach, I ate too much of those shrimps" she said while rubbing her tummy.

"I warned you, didn't I?"

"I'll go and sleep a little more"

"Okay, but don't sleep for too long, remember we have to check the store today" Sarah said.

With a simple nod, Hanna walked back to her room when she

suddenly felt nauseous, she quickly run to the bathroom and threw up. After washing her face, she stared the mirror, she was pale and weak. *What's wrong with me*, she asked herself.

CHAPTER 12

"I'm off for the interview Caro, see you later" Chris said as he quickly walked past the two ladies in the dining room. It was his final interview for the job offer he'd received from the company he'd interned before. It was merely a formality since he was already highly recommended through his hardworking and great résumé. Caro had to follow him considering the tension; Theresa was fuming mad and Chris was least interested to even look her in the eyes.

"Chris wait. . ." She called him up and a little reluctantly he complied. "Yes. Yes. Yes. I'm very aware that you feel like strangling someone right now, but that person is so not me. So tell me, how long are you planning on ignoring mother?"

"Until she acknowledge her mistakes and apologize. And we're not talking about this again! Also, I think I'm going to move pretty soon. . . it's about time I stop being Theresa's pet" he snapped in such a violent manner.

Caro winced a bit. "No. I'll pretend I didn't hear the last part. Good luck with your interview, this conversation is not over!" She declared, seriously.

"Caro I--" he tried to add something but upon seeing his sister's eyes almost watery, he stopped immediately. "I'll get going" he said and paced to his car, leaving her standing like a statue. For the first time Carolyn looked so defeated and scared, she was afraid of seeing her family shattering as they drifted apart slowly.

But she knew she had to do something about it, or else everything would fall apart.

While standing there fidgeting, Maria showed up crying. Caro took a deep sigh, ready to face another trial.

"Okay, let me guess. . . you've just got reprimanded by Theresa for that awful breakfast you made" she said, while drying her eyes discreetly. Maria continued sobbing. "Oh please Maria stop it! you know it's not your fault at all, you weren't hired for the cooking and we all know that. I'm having so much to deal with and having you adding to it doesn't help me at all. Look, why don't you go and rest a bit and later on we can figure out about lunch, huh?"

"You're so kind Carolyn. You don't deserve what's going on in this house" Maria replied, sniffing.

"I know. Too kind that I'm always in the middle of other's problems. Anyways, I'll go talk to my mother, we need to find a replacement for nanny Sarah. As much as it hurts!" She smiled bitterly and left.

Later in the evening of that day, once again, Caro attempted to reach to her brother after a single knock to his bedroom. She was relentless at first but took her chances and walked in. Christian's face darkened as soon as his blazing eyes rested on her. It was a cold gaze that could turn anyone pale, but not Caro, she was too tenacious.

"If you've come to give me one of your--" he sneers but she quickly silenced him with a smile.

"Don't worry dear brother, I won't peek my nose to where it doesn't belong, not anymore. I only came to ask about your interview!" She brushed past him and leaned against the edge of his bed, arms crossed with a scrutinizing gaze. He just scowled in silence. "So, how was it?"

"Great! I had no doubt about the position. I'm starting on Monday" he replied, vaguely.

After a long resigned quietness, Carolyn snapped. "Okay, Congrats! That was all" she threw him one last glance, without him flinching, and poutingly decided to leave when a quacky voice from him made her stop dead.

"I found her cellphone. Hanna's. At our secret hideout" he announced, still impassive.

"Really? How comes?" She quickly hastened to sit beside him, trying to grasp his unreadable expression. He let out a cynical smirk, pretending to be indifferent, even though it was impossible to fool Caro. "That explains why she couldn't get your calls. Aren't you going to do anything about it?"

"No. Her number is no longer in service, and besides she made her choice, so from now on, She's good as dead to me. I don't want to hear a thing about her!" He stood up and walked towards the window, both hands in his ripped blue jeans, he seemed to have lost few pounds.

To avoid the magnitude of the situation, Caro decided to take her brother's side and said, "You know, to think that I always liked and believed she was the right girl for you, it makes me so mad at her. . . So, you're right, she's not worth it" her remark made Chris laugh a bit, he knew the exactly iron behind those words. "I think the crazy Abbie is much better, speaking of which. . .any news about her?" At last they changed the subject.

"I spoke to her, she wasn't so well but arrived safely. I wish I could give her a hand"

"Too bad huh? She's a tough one though, I'm sure She'll get out of it"

* * * *

Two days later Hanna was home alone after a long nap. Both her mental and physical health weren't the best at the moment. She had a lot in her mind, and wasn't so keen on sharing her innermost torments with her mother. She made herself a cold lemonade and sat comfortably at the kitchen counter, her old laptop at the counter-top, checking her favourite culinary blog as a faint background music suppressed her distress. Not too long later, Sarah walked in, smiling broadly with her handful of grocery bags. Hanna looked up at her in bewilderment.

"Has something good happened Mrs. Sarah?" She asked.

"Very honey. Guess what, I met this woman who lives just few blocks from here, and she's actually looking for a partner in her

restaurant. I even saw it. . . it's small but very popular. Hanna it's everything I dreamed of, I love this place, and the people are very nice. I'm so excited dear" Sarah spoke so enthusiastically while unpacking, her eyes sparkling, and the sight enlightened Hanna.

She paced over and hugged her. "Oh mom. It's so nice seeing you happy and positive, I hope your dream comes true, because you deserve that and more" they both smiled, before pulling away, and a sudden worried expression engrossed Sarah's pale, yet fair face. She observed her carefully.

"Hanna, are you really okay dear?" She queried, and quickly Hanna returned to her place, evasively. "Hey, talk to me. . . you look sick! No this won't do, let's get you to the hospital" she demanded.

"No mom. I'm fine. I just woke up, that's why. Also I have something to tell you" she managed to diverge Sarah's attention as she nodded and presented herself more attentively. A bit hesitant at first, Hanna decided to break the news. "Mom, I'm not going back to college" she stared at her, waiting for the reaction.

"What? Are you crazy? Why? Is this because of Chris again?" Sarah asked without a break in between. Hanna rubbed her sweaty palms, scared of her touched sore spot. "Honey, you can't throw away your life because of him. I know you love him, and maybe won't be able to face him after everything, but quitting school? I d--"

"Mom it's not because of him, I do have my reasons. I want to do what I really want, what makes my heart beat, baking!"

"Huh?"

"Yes mom. You know exactly how struggling school has been for me, and for what, just so I can obtain a degree and wonder what my next step gonna be? No mom, I saw how excited you've been these past few days, getting closer to your dream. It made me wonder if this is really what I want for myself, and I came to conclusion that, I only want what's best for me" while finishing these words, Hanna's eyes were twinkling, as a soft sigh escaped her soft lips, plunging her gaze directly to her mother. Then the silence reigned, momentarily, before Sarah cleared her dry throat.

"Okay Hanna. What can I say? Seems like you've already made your decision" Sarah said, unable to hide her disappointment.

"Mom?"

"No, it's alright. I'm not complaining--well, I can't say I'm not disappointed" she forced a laugh. "But if that will make you happy, then go for it. Like what your father used to say, best people excel from what they're good at and not what makes them look good. So, I support you"

"Oh Mrs. Sarah, thank you so much!" Hanna gave her a quick peck and they shared a loud laugh. She then resumed her seriousness as she faced Sarah. "Um. . .I guess I should also tell you this, I'm going to talk to father!"

"Your father? Why?"

"Well. . .He'll be my benefactor! And don't try to argue mom, I know how hard-headed you can be but this is entirely up to me, I'll consult aunt Victoria to see her opinion on this, but I'm sure she'll be happy"

Although this wasn't so pleasant in her mother's ears, she somehow let out a faint smile to show her full support which was exactly what Hanna needed at the time.

Several days went by, as they slowly continued getting used to the life at Greenhills. With Sarah's easygoing personality, it wasn't hard at all to get acquainted with the neighbours who were mostly friendly. It was as if Hanna's father knew what Sarah wanted as he purchased the house; it wasn't too fancy but quite agreeable. Hanna was able to get a part-time job at a convenient store few kilometers from home; thanks to one of the few friends her mother made. Unfortunately there weren't many youths her age because for once she really needed a friend, a female one if possible.

One day she left home early for work, it was quite a fine November morning, and the blue sky in Greenhills complimented its beautiful nature that was a great attraction to the tourists. It was a growing town with a pure natural touch. Hanna arrived at the store a bit worn out; she had walked like a

rocket just so she wouldn't get in trouble with Mr. Scuba, the store owner who was completely smitten by Sarah despite her strict rejection.

"HANNA! You're late again" He snapped, his voice really grumpy, his personality even grumpier.

"Oh please Mr. Scuba, it's not even eight yet. Besides, I was helping my mother preparing the accounts!" She replied, while putting off her brown backpack. She could almost see the bulky big-bellied Mr. Scuba softening, slightly touching his clean mustache.

"Oh your mother? Is she okay?" He asked in a low voice. *TOUCHÉ!* Hanna smiled. She knew exactly how to disarm the poor man.

"Yes sir, thanks for asking. Can I get to work now?"

That day was filled with a strange loneliness as soon as Mr. Scuba left the store. The memories of Lycos flushed like a summer breeze and left her completely disoriented. She was missing him, so badly than ever before. She started wondering what if she'd confronted Chris that night, and demand for an explanation at the least. *What if I misunderstood the whole thing? But no, it was crystal-clear, he was only playing me.* she thought. Tears came down as she sniffed with her face buried inside her palms. It was too intense that she couldn't suppress the sound of her cry. Slightly leaning on the counter, a sudden spike of adrenaline made her feel the urgent rush to hear Christian's voice, she immediately picked her brand new smart

phone from her backpack. For the first time in a month she attempted to call him. She slowly dialed the few digits she so well remembered by heart and after several beeps, a warm husky voice from the other end, the one that melted her heart in a blink answered;

"Hello?" There was a pause. "Christian Ashton here, who is this?" He queried, sounding so reserved as always. But the silence started annoying him.

Hanna's breathing became uneven, she convulsed. Feeling even more in distress, she dropped the cellphone on the floor, hands trembling. The mixed memories of the passionate night they shared and the damn raid of him and Abbie hugging made her lose the little grip she was left. She bended over and tugged the phone, before turning it off with difficulty. With her numb legs, she fell on the floor, tucking them while bursting in tears, the tears she suppressed for a while, pretending to be stronger than she looked.

Her head got heavy, another dizzy spell took her over and made her gasp for some air. I have to get out of here, she thought while struggling to make a move. No customer appeared at that moment, so unlikely but Hanna was thankful for that; the last thing she wanted was for anyone to see her in that state, especially with the way news travelled fast in that town.

A bit later she was able to feel better, thanks to the fresh outside air. Something kept troubling her though; the foreign changes she kept experiencing; the dizziness, the loathing and

an unnecessary fatigue. It was alarming and so decided to see the doctor discreetly.

In the afternoon of the following day, she was sitting impatiently at the doctor's office when the slender man, probably in his early thirties appeared with some papers in his hand.

"Waited long Ms. Anderson?" He referred to Hanna as he slid into his chair, undecipherable look on his face. She just smiled nervously as the doctor cleared his throat, a faint smirk at the corner of his lips. "Well, I have your test results here!"

Hanna tensed up. "Um. . .Is it serious? Am I sick or something?" She asked him and he smiled to her surprise.

"Not at all Ms. Anderson. The test shows that you're pregnant. Congratulations!".

CHAPTER 13

"Pregnant!" Hanna exclaimed loudly.

"Yes. Is there a problem?" The doctor questioned her, but with a perfect indifference, as if he was accustomed with different reactions from his patients. Despite all that, his inquiring calm eyes never left hers until she decided to get up abruptly.

" I--" She stammered, a little more confused, hands fidgeting while tightly holding her pregnancy results. It all came as a gigantic surprise that not in a million years had she imagined herself pregnant, much less at the age of nineteen. "I'm sorry, I think I better leave" Without a word more, Hanna stormed out of his office in a hurry. Considering her speed, the doctor never got a chance to say another word.

Upon her arrival at the second hallway, Hanna decided to take a break. She was out of breath and her entire body was shaking as she took another quick glance at the results only to confirm that it was really positive; she was genuinely pregnant. Her mind drifted immediately to the day she shared a passionate night to the father of that growing thing in her womb, the man who happened to be nothing more than her best friend, the only man she'd ever loved. Everything matched, the time was perfect, and with no doubt she was pregnant. She long-sighed inwardly, trying hard to get ahold of herself, but it was like every force of the universe was against her. Her legs became jelly and without any resistance she was down on the floor, slightly leaning her head against the immaculately white corridor wall.

The time felt in a standstill, her eyes open but unable to see anyone except her own thoughts. *What am I going to do now?*, she asked herself, before allowing her mind to go blank as she slowly closed her eyes. Like a sound from a distant far, she heard someone calling out to her, and unfamiliar hands shaking her shoulders. She opened her senses as if splashed by cold water. Her eyes met a long white coat that blocked everything around her, she cleared her head with a shake and clearly saw a man beside her, she realized he was another doctor, a bit younger than the previous one.

"Are you okay? Can you get up?" He offered her his hand and with extreme difficulty she managed to get up with his help. Just then she was surprised to see a number of people staring at her.

"I-- I'm fine!" She tightened her grip around one of her backpack straps, embarrassed.

"Are you sure?" More worried this time, he asked.

"I said I'm fine!" She replied loudly, completely annoyed but the doctor was still calm despite her tone of voice. "Thank you. Excuse me!" She told him and left quite fast.

With great deal of politeness, the doctor asked everyone including few patients to go on with whatever they were doing. And when he was about to leave himself, he saw Hanna's test results on the floor, he grabbed them, then tried to catch up with her.

It was almost too late as he arrived at the hospital exit. Wondering how fast she must've been, he stood there panting,

his eyes scanning the surroundings until he spotted her at one of the benches in the park. The Greenhill hospital wasn't that big, but quite agreeable; It had modern facilities and the building itself was very contemporary. Never to mention the natural green vegetation which represented the beauty of Greenhill in general. One could never stop admiring the collection of peculiar shaped highlands from a distance and the air was so clean and soothing. Maybe that's what Hanna needed at the moment when the doctor approached her.

"Damn! Are you an athlete by any chance?" He announced his presence in that way. But unfortunately his audience was least impressed by his arrival. Hanna shoot him a cold glare. "Well, I suppose this is yours!" he revealed the papers and Hanna's first reaction was to search herself before snatching them, without uttering a word. "Don't I get a thanks?" He reproached.

"Thank you" Hanna replied, as if forced to comply. She slid them inside her bag, before shifting attention to the doctor. She noticed how tall and well proportioned his body was; he was admittedly handsome, probably the most breathtaking man she'd ever met. He had best features enough to drive any woman crazy, but that wasn't important for her at all, as her head was too occupied to dwell on such matters. He was looking at her while rubbing his clean cut haired chin, as his other hand buried deep inside the pocket of his medical-coat.

"Is that the reason why you're so hysterical? The test results?" He finally quenched his curiosity.

"No. The results are not mine!" Hanna replied without thinking,

almost too quick.

"Alright! You don't need to bite me!" He raised his hands in the air, as if surrendering.

"And I'm not hysterical. What's wrong with you?" Annoyed, she got up.

"Are you leaving already?"

"Yes. Do I need your permission?"

"No."

"Well then. . . " she snapped at him, with a cynic smirk this time and turned her feet.

Few seconds later she heard him;

"Hanna Anderson?" He called after her.

"What now?" She stared back at him even more annoyed.

"Everything will be fine. Don't worry!" He said loudly, a bright smile on his face. He then waved at her and walked away, leaving her standing there, no longer annoyed, but rather fascinated by those few words spoken by that strange doctor; the words she probably wanted to hear so badly. Not a while longer her face changed, when she realized that he'd just called her name, which meant he knew everything.

Hanna returned home late that night; she'd spent the rest of the day walking aimlessly until the sky swallowed the sun.

Luckily her mother was fast asleep as she walked into her bedroom and had a terrible night after. She woke up at usual time, the next day and found Sarah already in the middle of her routine.

"Tea or coffee?" She snapped at her as if she had eyes at her back considering Hanna's discretion while entering the kitchen.

"Tea please. Good morning mom" she replied lazily.

"Morning. You returned home late last night, where were you? Mr. Scuba said you left early" Sarah queried while handing her a tea mug without any eye contact. Multitasking was her speciality, she barely looked anyone in the eyes at such a moment.

"Nowhere specific, I just roamed around" she said, vaguely, while massaging her tempo. It was then when her mother placed her a plate full of scrambled eggs and fresh toast. She had a single mouthful and grimaced audibly.

"What? Did I put too much salt?" Sarah rushed over and had some. "I think it's fine, then why are--" she tried to ask her but Hanna dodged her upcoming bombardment.

"Mom I'm getting late. . .I'll just pack my breakfast and have it later at the store. You know how that old man is" she attempted to fool her mother and it was somewhat effective. "I'll just drink my tea" she smiled sheepishly, but there was a hint of doubt in Sarah's eyes.

"Okay. I'll pack it for you, get ready for work!" Sarah said before resuming her dishes.

"Okay. Thank you" she answered.

After changing quickly, Hanna grabbed her things, including few brownies and bid her mother goodbye.

"What's with the brownies? I thought you never liked them, especially the one you baked yourself" Sarah raised the surprised eyebrows, unable to understand something that she couldn't quite figure out.

"Oh, these-- I'm just taking them as a sample. I asked Mr. Scuba if I could sell them in the store" Without knowing, she was slowly becoming a professional liar in just few minutes; she was tense but perfectly composed in the outside.

"Really? That's good! I only think you could use some fresh ones, but anyway, it's up to you".

At last the morning passed, though with such a hassle. During working hours at the store, Hanna was anxious the whole time; even the distracting nagging of Mr. Scuba wasn't enough to diverge her tension. The mixture of fear, anxiety and mostly restlessness made her feel even more terrible. She needed someone to talk to, but her mother was the only one she had, and the idea of telling her everything wasn't her best option at the moment. She could only imagine how disappointed her mother would be.

That went on for three days. She made it possible to stay away from her mother for as long as she could. On Saturday morning, the fourth day, she was busy preparing a weekly sales report

when a customer appeared.

"One ginger tonic please" he said.

"Just a second" Hanna replied. She finished her entry on the computer and raised her head. Surprisingly, she muttered loudly, "You?"

A little startled, the man who seemed busy with his cellphone a second ago stared at her, bewildered and exclaimed in the similar manner "You!" He smiled. "Hanna, right?" He added.

"Yes. . . Doctor Strange?" She remarked, and made him laugh audibly.

"Doctor Strange? Well, I don't know if I should be flattered or offended, but I'll take it as a compliment"

"It's not a compliment, dummy!" She murmured.

"I heard that!" He said, still laughing, as Hanna returned with his drink, pretending like she'd heard nothing. "What a nice coincidence! So, you work here?"

"Obviously! Why else would I be here?"

"Yeah. Still hysterical! Do you ever quit?"

"Hey stop saying I'm hysterical! You make me sound like a mental patient" she pouted, staring at him drinking his ginger tonic with much calmness. Seeing him in a fresh morning light, he was even more attractive; casually dressed in khaki pants with a Royal blue shirt, he looked more like a fashion model than a physician. And when he smiled, the whole world turned

into a beautiful Paradise. Hanna cleared her throat and continued, "And you? What brings you here?"

He took his time to reply, "I live around here. The white house"
"That big boarding house?"

"Exactly! Please give me two more to go" he requested for more bottles, and in less than a minute Hanna returned with his order. He opened his wallet ready to pay. Hanna declined.

"It's all on me!" She said casually. It made him raise an eyebrow, until she added "Consider it as a thanks and apology for my hysteria Dr. Martin!" She found herself smiling at him and he joined her a moment later.

"Okay. Apology accepted! But, how do you know my name? I don't recall telling you that"

"Oh, so you think you're the only smart one? Okay, if it eases your curiosity, I saw a name tag on your coat. Happy?"

"Ah. That explains it. Actually I'm John, John Martin" he properly introduced himself.

"As you already know. . . Hanna Anderson!" She replied with a handshake.

They locked eyes for a minute, with smiling faces.

"Well ms. Anderson, I'll take my leave now. I hope you're fine, I mean you and--" his gaze fell to her stomach and she immediately placed a hand on it.

"Oh, yeah. We're fine" she said, then realized how awkward

that felt. *We're fine? I can't believe I've just said that*, she thought.

"Oh thank God! I was so worried!" John snapped, with a huge sigh of relief that almost left Hanna dumbstruck. He noted. "Oh I'm sorry . . . That just sounded weird right? It's just I thought you have-- you know, you didn't seem happy with the results so I thought maybe--"

"You thought I'd opt for an abortion?" Hanna asked plainly and he shook his head agreeably. "No, that never occurred to me, not even once" she said, absentmindedly, deep inside wondering why it never crossed her mind.

"That's good. Okay, I'll get going now. See you around Hanna, and don't forget to see a doctor, it's very important" he said and disappeared as quick as he came. But surely, his visit had left her with a lot to think of.

* * * *

Back in Lycos, Chris escorted Abbie back to the mansion after her long trip from Johannesburg. She seemed pretty much okay for a person who'd just lost a father; she was indeed a strong girl. As always, Theresa was delighted to see her, they hugged and settled at the lounge. Despite the time passed, her relationship with her beloved son wasn't restored back to normal; there was some tension left.

"Don't tell me he's still mad at you aunt?" Said Abbie,

concerned. "But don't worry, now that I'm here, everything will be fine" she reassured her.

"Oh Darling. You really like my son, don't you? Then this is your time. Now that the gold digger is gone, Nothing can stop you. It'll make me so happy knowing my son is with you and not some cheap little servant" Theresa said, spitefully.

"Do you think Hanna would return? We're in the same college remember?"

"Well, I don't know. But who cares? My son hates her now and besides she--" Theresa stopped halfway, and looked over Abbie's shoulder, then heard;

"Oh well well well. . . if it's not my two super villains then what else do we have here?" Carolyn snapped out of nowhere with a fake laugh. "So, what are you plotting now?"

"Can you at least pretend to have some manners daughter? Eavesdropping is so inappropriate!" Theresa said, gracefully as Abigail looked away, sighing.

"Oh what a pity! I'm sorry mom, perhaps you should've taught me better" she answered sarcastically. "Abbie, welcome back! And I'm deeply sorry for your loss"

"Thank you Caro. Maybe this is the first genuine thing you've ever said to me" she replied.

"Oh dear, I'm not so well accustomed to ironies. But I'm glad you believe this one, excuse me ladies" she smiled at them before proceeding to her usual escapades.

Later at night, Abbie sneaked into Christian's room when everyone was asleep.

"What is it Abbie? It's late, aren't you supposed to be resting?" Chris jumped as she locked the door in a certain mischief. Her attire was rather disturbing considering it was just the two of them alone, locked in his bedroom. He straightened up cautiously.

"We need to talk Chris. Right now!" She exclaimed, determined to make him listen whatever she had to say.

A bit relaxed, he took a long breath. "Okay, I'm listening, what's so important that can't wait till tomorrow?"

"It's about us!"

"Us? Okay, I'm all ears" He said. She tiptoed closer and sat beside him, with her revealing silky night gown; It was almost hard for Chris to let himself calm down. "Wait, put this on first" he handed her his long Cardigan that was lying on his bedside.

"Why? Do I make you uncomfortable by any chance?" Like a clueless little teenager, she dared asking him, but he never answered. "Oh please stop being barbaric! I'm fine like this. As I was saying, I know how you feel after being hurt by Hanna but--"

"STOP!" He snapped madly. "If you came all the way here to discuss about my feelings for Hanna, you better leave with all due respect. That's my own matter and I'm not discussing it with anyone. Not even you" he stressed in a most serious tone of his

voice, scary even.

"Relax! I'm sorry. . . I never meant to stir you like this" she told him in a very soft manner, and for once she managed to make him relax as he slowly leaned back against his pillow mountain. "We'll talk only about us. Chris, I want you back!" She snapped straight at his face, eyes fixed on him.

"Abbie I--" without giving him a chance to proceed, she jumped on his lap and found themselves only a centimeter apart. "Abbie what do you think you're--"

"Shh! No more talking!" She placed her index on his lips, staring at him so intently. "Let me love you Christian!" With that notion she attacked him like a hungry lion, kissing his lips so voluptuously. It took him by a huge surprise; the Abbie in his arms was more seductive than he'd ever thought, more of a volcano, something completely different from the woman in his heart, Hanna. His mind shifted to that night, he remembered her in his arms, her trembling body, how scared she was to even look at him. He recalled how contented he felt knowing he was the first man in her life. When his senses came to light, Abbie was staring at him, half-annoyed.

"What's wrong Chris? If you don't like it I can just leave!" She snapped, angrily. Then attempted to do as said, when he grabbed her wrist.

"No Abbie! Please stay!" He said in a hoarse voice, determined to let himself go.

CHAPTER 14

"Good morning family!" With great enthusiasm, Abigail greeted everyone as she descended the few stairs to the dining room where the rest of the family was having breakfast prepared by the new Cook. She was apparently in her best mood.

"Oh, seems like someone woke up on the right side of the bed. Good morning to you too Abbie." Caro replied, and found herself glared by three pairs of eyes, a little reproachingly. She shrugged, "Fine! I'm the black sheep. But as much as I'd like to know what's so good about this boring morning, I've got a place to be. So I'll see you later, FAMILY!" She smiled archly before rushing out.

Abbie rolled her eyes and muttered, "I just wonder what I ever did to her".

"Forget it darling, she's like that to everyone. How did you sleep?" Theresa asked. As usual she was already too elegant for a simple morning with nowhere to go, with her fork delicately holding a piece of fresh pineapple, she placed it down the plate as if she had had her full, then slowly ran her perfectly manicured hand to find a napkin that she used a second later.

"Very well aunt, thanks for asking!" she replied with a smile before shifting her entire attention to Chris who was just listening in silence. "And you Christian, how was your night?" She broke it playfully, making him almost choke his coffee.

"Fine!" He replied blatantly, and without any further adieu, he

excused himself; It was time for work. Abbie's eyes, filled with a mischievous sparkle never left his back as he left the dining-room.

"Did something I should know happen? Why did my son seem so flustered?" Theresa asked, very curiously.

"Everything happened aunt! For starters, I'm no longer a freshman, Sophomore, here I come! How about we go shopping aunt? Who knows, maybe I'll give you the details" she said, suggestively.

"Why not? You really remind me of myself. So practical. Let's go, I've got nothing planned for a day"

"Only if you promise you won't act like my mother. Living in the Natal has made her even more conservative"

With that, they both laughed loudly. Evidently, Theresa liked Abbie completely, she was willing to do anything to see her end up with Christian.

The following day, during evening Abigail and Carolyn confronted one another. It was inevitable considering that they were the only ones in the dining table for dinner.

"So, you want to talk? Fine! Let's talk" Caro snapped, but the hostility air between them was like a small halt in a Battle field. "But I'll go first. Abbie, I won't be subtle at all. . .I still don't believe you're a good match for my brother! I don't know why, I just feel it will never work!" She paused. Surprisingly, Abbie was

very serene and composed, unlike her usual repulsive self.

"Go on, I'm listening" Abbie said, and her audience breathed out a long sigh.

"But despite all that, I promised I'll never, ever again meddle in my brother's love life. So, if you two decides to start a relationship, it's up to you"

"What if I tell you that we have already started? Last night?"

"I know!"

"You do?"

"Yes, nothing passes me in this house. I saw you sneaking out his room earlier in the morning" Caro looked Abbie straight to her bewildered face, for once it made her laugh genuinely. "You should've seen your face! You look like a trapped squirrel"

B"A squirrel?" She touched her face as if confirming Caro's accusations. And this time they both laughed. "Look Caro, I get it. . .I'm hard to deal with, a brat maybe, even selfish, but I really love Chris. And I'll do everything to make him love me back. I'm not asking you to like me, I only hope we can have a civil relationship." A resigned silence fell, and a moment later Caro replied.

"You're right. We're two grown women, living in the same house, and go to the same college. It's only fair that we try to get along."

* * * *

Hanna was closing a store for a day when she heard someone calling her name. The voice sounded almost familiar to her ears as she turned around and saw John, all smiley.

"Hi there? I'm so glad you're still here" he snapped. Even in partial darkness his features never deceived, he stepped to the light holding something like a gift basket.

"Hey! Hi. . ." She replied, a little surprised with his sudden visit which was surely not as a customer. "I'm about to close, need anything?"

"Not at all. I only came to give you this" he walked forwards and handed her the gift.

"Fruit basket? For me?" She said enquiringly.

"Yes. But--not for you really? It's for that one!" he instinctively pointed to her belly. "I didn't know what you like, so I brought a little bit of everything!"

"Oh, I see. Thank you!" Hanna replied, hesitantly at first, she wasn't sure if it was a good idea to accept it, but she strangely felt comfortable about it. She finished the closing and grabbed her backpack. "Are you heading home?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Same. Seems we're heading the same direction!"

"That it seems" he said as they started leaving. It was almost

nine-thirty, but walking the night was never scary at all. Greenhill was very safe and so were the people. Walking like that, somehow reminded her of her time in Lycos, with Chris to be exact. The only difference was the number of people strolling around, the food stalls, couples having fun, it was a neighborhood that never sleep early. After slagging a bit awkwardly for a while, Hanna decided to break the ice.

"Tell me doctor Martin, why did you really drop by? Is it just to give me the fruits?" The question seemed to startle him, his jaw contracted, but remained impassive.

"I don't know Hanna, do I need another specific reason to be here?" He inquired. His moonlit face relaxed as if studying a subject for a research purpose. Seeing no response from her, who was still unconvinced, decided to come clean. "Okay you got me!" At last he got her full attention. "I spoke to Dr. Spencer, the one who attended you, and he said you never came back" His revelation left her speechless for one full minute.

"Hold on, let me get this straight. So you came all the way here to make me go back to the hospital?" She asked as they both halted, he nodded. "Okay. Why?".

"Um. . .well, as a doctor to a patient. Hanna, I'm only concerned nothing else" he stipulated, with utmost sincerity judging from the look on his face. "And if it makes you feel more assured, you'll never see me again. But only if you promise to see Dr. Spencer, So?"

"Hey easy there! What is this? We're not fighting right now, are

we?" She snapped at him and he simply shrugged. "Listen Dr. Strange-- I mean Martin" with that name John couldn't resist raising his thick beautiful eyebrow. "Forgive me if I sounded reproachfully a while ago, I'm just so confused at the moment so I tend to doubt everything and everyone"

"Very well young Lady, I here by forgive you and tell you exactly not to worry about a thing. I'm not a thug, nor a stalker, I'm just a concerned human being, maybe a bit nosy but--"

"Alright. Alright. Dr. Strange! God, you sound just like someone I know! Modesty is not your thing, huh?" She said. They laughed heartily, and continued walking, at least in harmony this time until they reached closer to Hanna's place. "This is it gentleman! I'm off here"

"Oh, is this where you live?"

"Yes, with my mom!" She enlighten him. He stood there silently for a minute, both hands in his dark pant pockets as if he was admiring the soothing night in his own way. "I'll go to the hospital tomorrow. I promise!"

"Wise choice Hanna! And do make sure to let me know when you come, that way I can rest more assured!"

"Huh, have you been corned your whole life doctor?" She beamed. "Anyways, I'll let you know doctor, that way you can stop nagging me!" they prolonged the conversation for almost twenty minutes, laughing, teasing was all it took, and with their combined charming personalities, the words flew so smoothly without much efforts. "Hey, you should go now, we both have

work to do in the morning"

"Oh yes. You're right" he peeked his cellphone quickly. "Good night Hanna".

"Good night." She stayed there witnessing him leaving, almost hesitant, like he never wanted to. And then she suddenly recalled something and decided to call him. "John?"

"Yes?" He turned his toes.

"How will I let you know? I don't even have your contact!"

"Oh, right. How silly of me! Here, it's my card. You can call me, e-mail me, anything that works for you" he gave her with a smile.

First thing Saturday morning, Hanna woke up early and fixed the house, then a quick breakfast for her mother who seemed to have had a busy Friday. Once done tidying her own bedroom, she showered and put on her pale blue T-shirt dress with simple white sneakers. Something to remind herself in Sydney where her aunt Victoria would nag her about feminism and tell her to dress like a lady. A twitchy smile escaped her lips, and the reminiscing stopped when her eyes rested on the mirror. She almost pat her belly but decided to quickly resign her image on the reflection. She left a note at the kitchen counter before leaving. After her first stop to the store, she head straight to the hospital around eight-fifty.

As agreed she let John know of her arrival and he met her moment after. He was extremely delighted to see her, as usual

his charms never ceased to bring Hanna's smile back as they talked shortly on their way to the Gy/obs department where Dr. Spencer was already waiting for her, per John's immediate arrangement.

"Come in Martin. . ." He invited them inside his office, before shifting his gaze solely on Hanna. "Hanna Anderson? Pleasure to have you back" he extended a hand towards her.

"Thanks doctor. I'm sorry for the other time" she responded politely.

"Already forgotten. I get that a lot, even worse!" he smiled. "So, shall we?"

Nervously, Hanna faced John, and he shrugged, playfully as always. "Can you stay with me?" Surprisingly, she asked him.

"Of course, If you want me to!" John said reassuringly. "It's no trouble if I stay, right Spencer?"

"Not at all. Give me a second, I'll be back!" Dr. Spencer replied before disappearing to another room.

"Hey. take it easy! It's a very normal procedure, no pain, no sting so relax. I'm here with you" sensing her anxiety, John held her hands and with a long sigh she nodded.

The Ultrasound test went smoothly and the results were pleasant. It appeared she had a healthy six weeks pregnancy and everything was okay. She had a follow up consultation, asked all the questions she had and received all necessary

details she needed. Not even once did John leave her side as if he was the father of that unborn child.

Almost an hour passed and the ordeal was over. "Oh! I'm glad this is over. Gosh! " she snapped out loudly on their way out.

"How do you feel now?"

"I'm not sure, rejuvenated? I don't know, I'm just seeing things in a different light"

"Really? How, positive? Negative?"

"Positive?"

"Great! That's all I wanted to hear" he smiled bashfully at her, the kind that can melt a heart and he apparently seemed to have that effect on many women, given the number of eyes from the Lady nurses whispering at the reception. "Like I told you before, it will be fine" He added and Hanna prompted with a simple nod. "By the way, I'll drop you off if you're going home!"

"Oh no! That'll be abusive of your kindness, you've done enough already. Besides, I'm sure you're needed here!"

"Hanna, I'm not a child. I know my schedule and if I offer to do something it's because I can. Period! So, any other excuse?"

"No sir, I see you don't take no for an answer, do you?"
Smilingly, she asked him. He only giggled, bemused, shook his head slightly and led the way out.

"Wait here. I will bring the car shortly" he demanded and in less than five minutes a black BMW halted in front of Hanna,

then the front window-glass scrolled down "Hop in!" He instructed.

"Wow! Nice car Dr. Strange! You've got quite a taste." She told him after making herself comfortable against the dark-cream leather seat. She smirked seeing his arched lips turn into a lingering smile.

"As much as I'd like to hear you flattering me again and again, I hate to break it to you that this is not my car" he stared at her archly while roaring the engine as the acceleration proceed, his slender long fingers delicately holding the steering.

"It's not?"

"Yes, are you disappointed?"

"Are you crazy? Why would I?" She barked. She was clearly offended by his remark, however, she maintained her composure perfectly well.

"A friend of mine is into cars dealership, he's trying to trap me into buying it. So, I haven't decided yet. But hearing you say it's nice, I'm kind of interested now" he remarked with indifference, something that bothered Hanna a bit. She was having a hard time understanding him in general, wondering what his words meant at times, but decided to ignore. "Since I'm going to Lycos, it'll be a perfect test drive!" He added.

"To Lycos? Right now?" She jumped quickly, as if she'd seen a ghost.

"Yes, to Lycos! Why are you so surprised?" He inquired,

somewhat surprised by her reaction.

"Um--nothing! Just-- " she hesitated. Her mind was already at the Ashton residence, it was stubbornly tempting her to think of Chris, the pregnancy and many other stuffs.

"Do you want to go with me?"

"Yes!" She urged. "I mean if it's okay with you!"

"Cool." He agreed and off they hit a high road to Lycos. Hanna had a lot in her head that she failed to respond promptly at John's trials to converse. They fell silent the rest of the trip as she only concentrated on the sliding landscape displayed outside the window, while welcoming the fresh air that nonetheless failed to calm her raging nerves. When they arrived over two hours later, she politely asked him if she could go for her personal errand and meet up with sometime later. "Fine by me, just make sure we meet on time. Same place!" He insisted and they both agreed.

Quickly, she hauled a taxi and went straight to her former home; to the Ashton's. Each step that she took closer to the house, made her heart beat out if rhythm. It was already too sunny but the thick tree trunkline allowed only few rays to hit her skin as she paced farther and farther away from where the taxi had dropped her. She eventually came face to face with the metal like railings gate that's in front of the mansion. Mixed emotions took her by surprise as she remembered some of her most wonderful memories she'd shared in that house.

She Stood there for quite a good while, trying hard not to give in the temptation to go in, nor crying like a crazy woman in the front of someone's house. Decidedly, she head to the lake, probably her favourite place in Lycos. A place where she used to hang out a lot with him, using jogging as an excuse. The bench was still there, the water as calm as it used to be, with the white floating ducks on top that she quite enjoyed watching. A bittersweet smile escaped her dry mouth as she instinctively held her stomach. She sighed heavily before turning to the secret den, her heart tightened against her chest. *That's right, this is where it all went wrong*, she thought, her hand pressed hard against her belly. She couldn't even bring herself to get closer, instead, she decided to leave. For once she realized how stupid it was to go back there, she swallowed convulsively, glancing one last time at the place.

She walked very quickly on her way back, hoping not to be noticed by anyone that might recognize her, but unfortunately, things didn't go as planned. She suddenly paused still when reached near the Ashton's, Chris and Abbie, were getting out of the house, holding hands, like a happy loving couple would. It was Saturday noon, obviously they were enjoying the beautiful autumn-weekend. But it was a blow-job to Hanna, she felt numb, unable to move, and with no where to hide. She knew she wasn't supposed to see him, neither he her, but her question was, *how do I go unnoticed*.

CHAPTER 15

Facing the world she'd left behind wasn't the best move; Hanna was not ready for that. Seeing Chris again, took her a great deal of shock, especially with Abbie who was like a mortal enemy at the time.

She immediately turned around, without taking a step, holding her breath as if her entire being depended on it, with her hands clutching the round collar of her T-shirt dress. It was the only reflex she could come up with, hoping that they never see her and surprisingly that was the case. Minutes passed, but it felt like the world had ceased to revolve. With her heavily pounding heart, Hanna slowly returned around, and found them gone, probably to the other direction. That's when a long breath of relief escaped her lungs and almost fell to the ground.

She composed herself. But the whole idea that those two were evidently lovers, made her fists clenched. Hurriedly, she made her steps farther just to get away from that place.

Unfortunately there was no sign of any taxi since almost everyone in the neighborhood had their own cars. As if heavens were never on her side, she ended up meeting Maria carrying the groceries who screamed enormously.

"Hanna? My God, it's really you!" She was so astounded to see her, hence started bombarding her with countless question which were mostly hard to answer. "So, why did you agree to leave like that?" With Maria's curious nature, Hanna had no

choice but to tell her exactly what happened; that Chris was the main reason why she decided to leave.

"So, that's it. . . Anyways, it seems he's doing fine with Abbie. It all worked out fine, right?" With lingering tears in her blue-gray eyes, she tried to make it sound fun as if it never bothered her but the expression on her face betrayed her. "I'm sure Theresa is over-joyed now!"

"You bet that right! She practically encourages their relationship. . . can you believe the two of them sleep together sometimes? And Theresa doesn't even say a thing! what a horror!" She snapped, seemed like her gossiping habit had never ceased, she then realized how hard it was for Hanna. "Oh no Hanna, you two made a great couple! I don't know how things turned out this way but I'm sure--" she paused, as if she'd just remembered something. "Wait, maybe you misunderstood the situation that night before you left. . . because--"

"I'm sorry Maria, I think I have to go! Please don't tell anyone that you've seen me. Absolutely no one! Seems everyone is happy, so let's leave things as they are" she professed in a hurry, her phone was buzzing but got disconnected as soon as she picked. She ignored, and turned to Maria "Well it was great seeing you Maria, I'll tell my mother to call you. She misses you a lot" she hugged her in a jiff before turning her toes leaving her a little flustered with a lot to say and ask.

Unable to get a taxi, she rode a bus instead. It was very hard to contemplate all that has been heard and seen in such a short

while. As her becoming usual, she encircled her belly and tears fell down without a warning. She wiped them fast so as not to be noticed. She felt the need to be strong, because she had to, being a mother was never part of her plans, and much less a child without a father. It was as if her entire universe had collapsed, she had no idea how to go from there, and that terrified her big time.

About fourth minutes later, Hanna met up with John. "Damn it Hanna! Haven't you seen my text? And calls? We need to head back right now, there's an emergency surgery I need to assist!" He snapped at her furiously the minute she arrived at their meeting place, a phone to his ear ready to give her another call in case she never showed up. He tossed it inside his pants pocket.

"I'm sorry! I was a little distracted!" She replied softly. She deliberately, tried to avoid any contact with him by slipping to the passenger seat without further explanation.

He took a deep breath before taking his spot in front of the steering. "So did you finish your errands?" He stifled a talk after a long reign of silence that began to feel like a funeral home. To his surprise, Hanna was unresponsive, her eyes fixed to the front windscreen. The profound sadness that she tried so hard to repress ended up getting the best of her. Unable to keep it anymore, she bursted into tears, audibly, and made the doctor hit the brakes hard. "Hey, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"Nothing!" She muttered.

With her eyes closed, she sniffed, before covering her face with a single palm as if ashamed to reveal her weak side to that sweet stranger. The last thing she wanted was to cry, especially with an audience beside her. John continued staring at her with bewilderment, without moving his gaze until he unbuckled his seatbelt to allow his muscled-torso to get closer to her.

"Hanna talk to me for God's sake, are you crying because I raised my voice a while ago? Please forgive me, I didn't mean to be rude I just--" he ran a hand through his low-cut hair, regretfully.

"No you're not the reason John, It's me! I'm so stupid. I shouldn't have gone back! It's all my fault!" She sobbed with a scratchy voice and for a moment John had a disturbed look.

"I don't get it, gone where?"

"To our old home, I saw him! I saw them together, they looked happy! So happy!"

He frowned. "Him?" He inquired, but with his smart brain it only took half a minute to catch up. "The father of your--" he couldn't even finish as she nodded responsively. It was as if she had confessed an injustice to him given his strange reaction when he opened his eyes, all dark and furious, a fold between his two thick brows. "Damn it! How dare he--" he sighed. "well. . . Is he aware of your condition?" A bit less perplexed, he asked.

"No! I haven't told anyone about this, not even my mother!"

"What? But that's crazy Hanna! How can--" he barked haltingly,

seeing the defeated look on Hanna's face, he lightened completely. He lifted one arm and pulled her into an embrace in which she accepted with no reluctance. Her head nestling on his shoulder, she wiped her tears discreetly with the handkerchief he had lent her, she tried her best to get a grip, while feeling his body tensing, as if he was so mad at someone, but definitely not her. "Was it a break up?" With that question, it was enough ticket to detach herself from his warm shelter.

"No. It's complicated! We never had anything for it to be a break up!" She was finally back to her full senses.

"What does that suppose to mean?"

"John, I'd rather not talk about it please" she pleaded and like a true gentleman he nodded respectfully. "Thank you, let's just leave now or else you might be late for the surgery" she suggested as she returned his handkerchief back.

"Oh right! Please put on your seatbelt ms. Hysteria, the last thing I want is problems with the cops!" At last his cheerful mood was back and it was enough to stifle a laugh.

Throughout the way, they had a chance to talk and exchange few stories. Hanna got to know a bit about him, that he was volunteering for a year as a heart-surgeon. He was still a student on his way to being a specialist. He sounded very smart and ambitious considering the fact that he was from a humble background. Thanks to his braid coupled with hard work, he got a full-funded medical scholarship at John Hopkins where he found much interest in Cardiology.

While talking to him, Hanna realized that he was actually a good person, admirable, with a very positive outlook about life and people around him, something that she needed to learn. Even when she told him that she'd quit college, he didn't judge her, instead he asked if there was something else in mind that she'd rather do. And that's when she told him about her passion in Gastronomy, he was impressed, and advised her to follow her heart.

He dropped her off the store as she specified, and it was almost four pm, the sun had almost cooled down when she took off.

"Thank you" she told him. "Now go and save a life Dr. Strange!" She added with a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

He shook his head smilingly, "I'll do my best ma'am! You look great in that dress, by the way!" He snapped out of nowhere, and made her blush a little as she stared at her dress, her aunt's gift on one of their summer vacations in Santorini. Victoria had quite a taste, a woman of the world, with a total control over her life. She'd been Hanna's best inspiration in life. The thought that she might be disappointed after coming to knowledge of her pregnancy made her heart sink.

"Thanks!" She smiled at him and wiggled her fingers to say good bye.

* * * *

"WHAT the hell is this Hanna?" Sarah's flashing voice startled her

a minute she walked inside her own bedroom, after slowly sneaking her way from the quiet living room with the lights oddly switched off throughout the house.

She stupidly let her bag fall on the floor in fear. "M-mom I can explain! Its--" she stuttered, still motionless.

"Explain?" Sarah stood up, with the papers in her hand this time, threw a quick glance at them then back at her. "Explain what? That you're pregnant? Or the fact that you hid it from me and I had to find out because of a damn laundry?" She snapped, madder than she'd even been before, pointing the pile of dirty laundry that she couldn't do.

"I-- I wanted to tell you mom, I swear" A bunch of tears fell down her cheeks, mingled with fear that made her totally destabilized. She couldn't utter a thing thereafter except the sobbing, facing the shiny black tiles. "Okay, I made a mistake. I shouldn't have kept it from you, No, I shouldn't have slept with Chris in a first place!" She finally gathered the courage to speak up, roaming the room like a confused puppy.

"No I don't deserve this! No mother deserves this! First you quit college, and now this?" Her mother shouted, exasperatedly shaking her head in denial. She glared at her, as if she couldn't believe any of it. "You shouldn't have stayed in Australia! It's all my fault! Is that all you learned there? Didn't Victoria teach you anything? Now what? Are you going to tell the father? Oh-- does he even exist?" the followed sarcasm stirred Hanna up.

"You don't need to be such a brute MOTHER! At least not you,

or have you forgotten you had me when you were only what? Seventeen?"

"WHAT? What did you just say?"

"You heard me mom! If you wanted a perfect daughter, you and dad shouldn't have posted me like a parcel to a foreign country when I was just seven! So don't you dare speak badly of aunt my aunt!" She screamed. "She raised me when you were busy raising other people's kids. In fact, You should be thankful" she said with clenched teeth, Sarah's jaw almost fell off, with eyes watery, astonished. "And for the record, I'm not ecstatic about this. . .I didn't plan any of this!"

"HOW dare you--" Angry to the extreme, Sarah raised her voice but only for a second as Hanna walked out. "I'm still talking to you Hanna, where do you think you're going?" She tailed her, trying to get ahold of her but she was too quick for her old reflexes. She lashed the door open and disappeared into the darkness without staring back at her for even a second.

A half an hour of sobbing in the middle of the Greenhill kindergarten-playground helped Hanna a little. Frustrated still, and pretty angry, she stared at her digital watch, and immediately her subconscious reminded her that it was a gift from Chris. "DAMN YOU CHRIS ASHTON! I HATE YOU!" she shouted while pulling off the watch straps and threw it away in the grass-field. Lucky for her, no one was around near by except the swings, benches and other playing stuffs for kids. It was seven-thirty when she decided to get ahold of herself and led

her feet to the hospital. She needed someone to talk to, and that was John Martin. Her only wish was to find him there.

"Excuse me, is Dr. Martin still here?" Seemed the rustling chilly night wind did its magic to alter her mood a little. She was more relaxed as she asked the pretty short-haired nurse at the reception who responded with a charming smile as if already she knew her.

"Oh hi there, I think he's taking the rounds. But you can wait over there, I'll let him know right away that you are here!" She said and picked her cellphone.

Slowly, Hanna followed her instruction and seated herself in the one of the chairs at the lounge. After waiting for over fifteen minutes, she decided it wasn't a good idea to appear at someone's workplace uninvited, plus the quivering sensation inside her body and mind she thought it was best to leave. As soon as she started heading back to the reception, a familiar and charming voice stopped her.

"Tired of waiting already?" John was right beside her, when or how he reached there unnoticed was only a matter of wondering as he smiled sheepishly at her, delicately dressed in his blue-green surgical uniforms that still complimented his handsomeness. A little relieved, Hanna let out a forced grin, it made him frown. "Is everything okay Hanna?" He asked with concern.

"Um--Yeah! Everything is fine, except that I'm famished! Can you buy me dinner? I'll pay you back, I promise!" She muttered.

But it was like a blow even to herself as she nibbled her fingers nervously, and mostly embarrassed. John raised a wry eyebrow, one arm folded across his wide chest and the other scratching his short beard with his thumb, obviously not convinced.

"Okay! But I'm going to pretend I didn't hear the paying back part. . ." Smilingly, he gripped her hand and pulled her off the lobby, taking her by complete surprise.

"Hey, I can walk by myself you know!" She snapped. "I didn't even say goodbye to the pretty nurse, how rude!"

"Don't worry, she'll understand!" He replied, without paying any attention to her struggles to release his tight and warm grip.

"What do you mean?" She asked, eventually relaxing her palm in his. They walked into a restaurant opposite to the hospital. Oddly, the night view outside was totally different from during the day, less people, quietness, it was almost calm except for the traffic noises. He pulled a chair for her in one of the empty table-for-two. The place was a bit packed, traditional interiors, almost too ordinary. "Hey Dr. Strange I'm talking to you!" Hanna insisted.

"Look, I don't know why, but when Cathy called me earlier, she addressed you as my girlfriend. . . In short, everyone at the hospital thinks that way" he told her casually, his two hands on the table, staring her in the eyes as he stood across her seat. "I'll go make our order! Oh, I'm not sure the food is to your liking but this is the best place around here" he let out a beaming smile before straightening up, leaving Hanna gaping.

Several minutes passed before his return.

"Wow, this looks delicious. . ." she giggled while pulling over the wooden tray filled with potato fries, salads and beef-skewers. Her amusing look stifled a superfluous grin on John who was eyeing her fixedly. "But you know what I'd really love to eat?" She asked, her hands already crucifying the food. Intrigued, John shrugged his shoulders, with arched eyebrow. "Grilled chicken, dipped with garlic, honey and soy sauce. . .mmh how tasty!" She grimaced, this time he couldn't resist laughing audibly, oblivious of the food tray at his front as he casually leaned against his chair, enjoying everything she was saying and do.

They had a meal in an impossible silence as each time they found themselves commenting and laughing on some indiscreet couples who were mainly the Greenhill hospital staffs; mostly doctors vs nurses.

"You're not full, are you?" He questioned, staring at Hanna's empty plate. She nodded, embarrassed. "Hey, I'm not usually like this-- I just feel. . .not full, that's all" she defended herself to wipe off John's smirk.

"I know. I have an idea, how about a desert? I'm sure it'll suffice your Somalian-hunger without compromising your digestive system from overeating" he suggested, his mischievous gleam still.

"Cool"

"Okay, be right back"

When he returned a moment later, he placed a big full topped chocolate cake before resuming his seat.

"Chocolate huh?" She squirmed, elatedly.

"Yes, you can have it all!" He grinned momentarily and she shoot him a killer glance that stole his laugh. "And don't be shy, I like pretty girls with big appetite" he whispered to her ear, then dived back his spot, leaving her with a lingering chuckle.

"Hah! Was that supposed to make me feel better?"

"Yes, did it work?"

"Not at all! But then again, I'll enjoy it, the cake!" She took a bite and slowly savoured the taste before swallowing, a V line formed between her brows.

"What? Don't you like it? I always find their chocolate cake the best so I thought maybe--"

"You like chocolate cake?" She asked him, then casually took another forkful, ignoring his question. He nodded, agreeably. She had another bite, but her face was indifferent.

"You don't like it, do you?" He repeated.

"Well. . .I was raised by a baker, one of the best I've known so far, so you can't blame me if I have high standards. But don't worry, it's not so bad!" She said teasingly and he rolled his eyes then laughed.

"Oh I'm very sorry ma'am, I completely forgot that I'm dealing with a food-pro to be. Perhaps you can show me one of your

specialities one if these days"

"With pleasure! I'm gonna blow your mind with the best chocolate cake you've ever eaten!"

With all the talk and laughing, Hanna had completely forgotten all her troubles as if the man in front of her had a magical ability to wipe away all her fear with a simple conversation. And that moment she realized that deciding to see him at the time, was the best thing she could come up with, she had no regret.

"So, are you going to tell me now?" All of a sudden John's face took a serious facade as his ember eyes dug hers deeply. "You didn't come all the way here for a simple meal, what happened Hanna?" He finally pull it off. Not knowing where to start, Hanna exhaled deeply, her vexed expression back. She closed her eyes momentarily to recollect her grip before telling him the whole story.

It was almost midnight when the black BMW parked in front of Hanna's house with them both exhausted at the front. They had had a really long and eventful day which was soon to end.

"Thanks a lot John, I mean it!" She said softly, unbuckling the seatbelt around her waist.

"Glad to help. Like I said, apologize to her! She's your mother Hanna, not your enemy. She'll always be by your side regardless how much you've messed up" he replied, looking at her tenderly, with the dim-yellow lights illuminating her shiny eyes. "And I'm also here for you, anytime you need me!" He added, with a

sweet smile this time, that got reciprocated, lucky for him. For once Hanna wondered how crazy fate can be at times, her meeting with that beautiful stranger was something she'd never imagined even once, and he appeared at the crucial moment like a superman tailored-made for her.

"Do you realize you're like my superman?" She snapped without realizing, catching him by surprise.

"Oh am I now? From Dr. Strange to Superman! We'll see what Marvel have to say about this" his teasing remarks made her laugh, even though exhaustedly as she leaned her head, one-sided against the leather. "Go and get some rest, and don't over-think or stress yourself, okay? You can only think of the chocolate cake you're going to bake for me!"

"You're crazy! You sound like a five-years-old boy, have you seen the twinkle in your eyes when you talk about a cake?"

"I can't help it! You brought it up!"

"Fine. I'll do as you say. Good night!" She grabbed the door handler.

"Good night Hanna!" He replied, then silently watched her walking away, before finding his way back to the hospital while filling an empty space she'd left behind with some soul music.

* * * *

"Seems like I'm not the only one having troubles sleeping!" Carolyn snapped, walking towards the marble counter-top where Chris rested his elbows, idly, sitting in one of the barstools. It was few minutes past midnight and the mansion was creepy-silent, everyone else asleep. He sneered when he caught her face.

"Grant's? At this hour? . . . I hope you're not picking alcoholism a tendency, little sis!" He joked, seeing her holding a bottle, obviously stolen from Theresa's expensive bar collection.

"HA! HA! Very funny!" She replied, sarcastically. "One shot for my sorrow won't ever kill me! Wanna join me?"

"Sure! It's a weekend after all!" He replied and in a jiff Caro emerged with two rectangular glasses then a silver-container filled with ice blocks, and placed herself next to her only brother, playing bartender.

"That's Hanna's phone, right?" She casually asked, pointedly at the mini smartphone on the table, after pouring him a drink. They clinked glasses, then sipped a chilly burning ember liquid, she groaned a bit, staring at him expectantly.

"Yeah. I've been thinking of her the whole day" he said haltingly, "I think I'm going crazy, can you believe I felt like I saw her today!" He smirked, crookedly.

"Huh? What do you mean?" She questioned, a bit tense. "I mean where?"

"Outside the mansion, I was with Abbie, in a good mood and all.

. .so I didn't want to spoil things because of my delusion" He looked at Caro, and she quickly gulped her drink. "Either way, It changes nothing whether it was really her or not, I've moved on, and I don't want to hear anything about that girl" he added, contemptuously.

Carolyn swallowed hard, still silent, unlike her usual self. "Are you sure about that Chris?" She finally uttered, concerns all over her oval face.

"Absolutely!" He pondered. In Caro's mind was a recollection of what Maria had told her earlier that evening, that she'd met Hanna, and explained the whole reason for her sudden departure. She almost convulsed at the thought. "Hey, what about you? What keeps you awake this time?"

"Ah--me? Nothing! What could be wrong in my boring life?" She poured another round to them both. Caro was the most discreet person in the family, she never discuss her troubles with anyone, yet she's always available in trying to solve other's problems.

"If you insist! Just don't forget your big brother is always at your disposal. I'll be glad to listen, whatever it is"

"I know." She flushed. They talked for a very good while until they got a bit tipsy and head to their rooms. Eventually, she decided to shut her mouth regarding the issue with Hanna, and left things as they were.

CHAPTER 16

"I'm sorry mom! I didn't mean to hurt you" Hanna said, softly, the next morning. For a moment Sarah stopped the dishes, turned off the faucet before turning to her.

"Well you did hurt me! All I wanted was for you to have a better life Hanna, the life that I couldn't give you. Sending you away wasn't an easy decision . . . also, I wanted you to graduate like other kids, have a great job, get married and--" She couldn't contain her pain as she sighed heavily. "I never imagined you being a mother at your age. It really shocked me!"

"I know mom, that's why I'm saying sorry! You've no idea how I felt when I found out myself, I just wanted to die! It was terrible" while wiping the tears with her fingertips, Hanna told her, and in an instant, Sarah closed herself to her and gave her a tight hug.

"Oh my baby! Forgive me . . . I was too harsh and forgot how you must've been feeling." She said. "But don't worry, we'll figure it out!" She smiled, auspiciously, then released her. "So, how are you feeling now?"

"Better! My baby is fine, I went to the hospital yesterday and-- It all went well" Hanna replied, smilingly with an optimistic tone of voice. She'd eventually come to terms with her condition.

"Oh God! look at you! You're even calling it your baby already! You're so brave honey, I just wish you wouldn't grow up too quickly and remain my baby for a bit longer!"

"Come on mother! I'll never cease to be your baby! Even if

you're a grandma now!"

"A grandma! Oh God!" She snapped audibly and made them both laugh out loudly. With the peace back intact, Hanna didn't want to ruin it, so decided to keep the information about her visit to Lycos a secret. She wasn't sure how her mother would've taken it. "By the way, I talked to your aunt last night. I was so disoriented and thought I needed to vent!" Sarah confessed.

Surprised, Hanna prompted, "You didn't fight with her, did you?" She lent her a hand with the dishes.

"No, we only talked! I told her the news and like myself, she was fuming-mad!"

"Oh Great! That explains the bundle of missed calls and video chats on my phone . . . she's going to kill me with words!" She grimaced and Sarah shrugged. "I'll have a chat with her later, then my father!" She marveled at the thought, and it wasn't a happy scenario.

"NO! Leave your father to me. I know how to deal with him." Sarah declared, somewhat madly. "Besides, He and I have a pending matter to discuss" she clenched her jaw, absentmindedly.

"Oh-- okay, that was scary ms. Sarah! Don't tell me you had a fight with him!" She queried, a little wary, scrutinizing her mom's reaction closely.

"A fight? Not at all. . ."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, really!"

"Mm . . . do you still love him?"

"YES!" Sarah answered, then glared regretfully at Hanna who was having a great deal of fun, grinning. "Oh no, this is not funny Hanna Anderson!"

"Oh yes it is! It's obvious you still love my father, look at you, you never dated anyone for God knows how long--"

"And how do you know that little Missy?"

"Its written all over your face! And I think he loves you too!"

"I'll pretend this discussion never happened- he's a married man!"

"Unhappily married!" She snapped and flashed out the kitchen, leaving her mother hanging.

The rest of the morning was calm and pleasant. At last they had an understanding and Sarah promised to always be there for her. Although it was hard for her, she still made her mind to support her only child through such a mishap which was also a blessing.

Later in the afternoon Sarah poked her head into Hanna's room and said, "I'm going out for a while, Hanna. Lunch is ready, in case you're hungry--which you should be! I won't take long!" She insisted.

"Okay. Have fun Sarah dear!" Hanna replied, a little occupied with her laptop, trying to get in touch with Victoria. In a second,

the door banged and gone was her mother. Tired of waiting for the response, she decided to call John instead, and he picked in just three rings. "Hey doctor!"

"Hi. . . " he replied, hoarsely at the other end.

"Everything okay?" She straightened up, and leaned over a set of pillows, relaxedly.

"Yes! I just got up"

"Right now, one in the afternoon Dr. Strange! Have you lost track of time?"

"Am I being reprimanded right now?" He questioned, lazily. Hanna chuckled.

"Well it depends! For instance, what did you do last night to make you sleep like that?" She asked, smilingly, then lied down flat, facing the ceiling. She could almost hear his breath, as he took a second to think.

"Um. . . I pretty much saved few lives, I rescued a certain damsel-in-distress, fed her, and took her home! Then I went back to the hospital, I had some paperwork to finish, so the bottom line is, I killed the night"

"Oh! Does that mean you slept in the hospital?" Very concerned, she asked.

"Yes, I returned at the boarding house this morning. I only sleep here on weekends anyway! So, how is my pretty lady doing?"

"Great! Thanks to her rescuer! I just called to tell you how it went with my mom. . ." she explained about her little chat with her and thanked him once more for his precious advice.

"Told you! Everything will be fine. Now that you've woken me up, I really need to feed myself! I'm starving!"

"Breakfast or lunch?"

"I'm not sure! Whatever I can find nearby!"

"What if I invite you over for lunch? At my place?" She suggested, then regretted it immediately as John fell silent. "I mean if it's okay with you! I don't mean to impose if you feel uncomfortable with the idea!"

"Hey, are you kidding me? Why would I miss a chance to eat a homemade meal? On it! I'll be there in an hour, I need to freshen up first!" He snapped happily.

John arrived earlier and received a warm welcome smile from Hanna before she politely led him in. "Welcome to ms. Sarah's residence! Too bad she went out a while ago" she added an apologetic smile.

"It's okay, although I was so eager to see her, and a bit nervous" John said.

"You? nervous? I'd really love to see that!" She nudged him on the shoulder and laughed together.

"How long have you been living here?"

"A month or so . . ." she answered as they halted at the lounge. "Do you want a house tour?" She snapped teasingly, trying hard to contain her tingling laugh when she heard his stomach growling.

"Are you messing with me Hanna?" He snapped, pretending to pout.

"Okay! I'm kidding. Let's take care of that fella now!" She smirked and took him to the kitchen where she'd already set the table at the counter.

After lunch they settled at the living room watching a boring movie while talking. Hanna was sitting on the rug and he was comfortably resting in the couch. "Damn, that chicken stew was the best! I'm so full that I can't even move" John snapped finally. "Thanks for the food, it was delicious!" He added.

"You're welcome! And I'll make sure to let my mother know that she's got herself a new fan." Hanna grinned at him.

"Oh she surely has! Trust me, it's been ages since I had a home-meal. And no offense, the taste reminds me of this woman I know, she was like. . .a mother to me. I wonder how she's doing now!" He started reminiscing in silence, a lingering smile on his relaxed face.

Hanna looked up at him for a second, then asked him "And your mother? Where is she?"

"She died!"

"Oh I'm so sorry. . ."

"Don't be! I hardly remember her face! I grew up with my father, and he's the best!" He said, proudly.

"Yeah I can tell. . ." she said with a smile.

With the long talk, they even lost track of time as it was almost sunset. John fell asleep on the sofa and Hanna was in the kitchen, indulged in her laptop, after a serious talk with her aunt Victoria. She had a lot to process after getting a brazen declaration that she should return to Australia as soon as possible. She took a deep resigned sigh before closing the PC and walked back to the living room where she regained her smile back at the sight of a sleeping doctor. She moved closer and bended slightly to catch a perfect view of his beautiful face. He seemed relaxed, deep into a dreamland perhaps, and his breathtaking looks were even magnetic in a close-up. *He's too handsome for my taste*, Hanna thought before stifling a giggle that ended up breaking the spell.

"Hi there. . ." he smiled.

"Hi!" She murmured as he quickly sat up.

"God, why didn't you wake me? I've slept for how long. . ." he peeked at his watch "Damn! Two hours?"

"Well, you looked tired so it was only fair to let you sleep. Don't worry you didn't snore!" She teased him, then rested at the armchair.

"Of course I don't snore!" He replied, already at his toes,

pulling his shirt-sleeves up his biceps. "Okay, I'll take my leave now"

"I'll walk you out" she snapped and left side by side. "Actually, I had a great time!" She said when he reached his car outside. Surprisingly he faced her, amused.

"Me too! It was perfect, except I couldn't see your mother! I'm sure she's as pretty as you are" he smiled again, making her blush "See you tomorrow maybe?"

"Not sure! I'll accompany my mother to the city, she has some stuff's to buy for her restaurant. We'll take a morning bus so I'm not sure when we'll be back!"

"Oh, I see! I'll call you then. . ." he said suggestively and she nodded. "OK, stay safe!"

"Drive safely!"

With that, he vanished in an instant. She remained there still, feeling the soothing evening breeze brushing her silky hair accompanied with the rustling trees that took her breath away. For a moment, she wanted to forget everything and only savour the wonderful Sunday she had just had.

The next day she woke up in a different state, she wasn't feeling well. Her body rejected all the effort she had put into getting up, and decidedly she lied back exhaustedly.

Minutes later her mother walked in.

"Good morning!" She greeted her enthusiastically but seeing her response, she frowned. "What's wrong honey? Are you feeling sick?" She rushed to her bed and placed a hand on Hanna's forehead, worriedly.

"Relax madam, I'm fine! I just feel exhausted" she smiled warmly before setting herself comfortable, leaning against the mountain of pillows. "Morning sickness? Something like that!"

"Oh Jesus! I can't get used to this, hearing you talking like that?"

"Me neither! Creepy, isn't it?" Hanna said and they both laughed. Responsively, she moved on her mother's lap and lied her head like a child would. "Thank you so much mom! What would I do without you! I love you!"

"I love you too baby!" She replied softly, while braiding her hair in a smooth-move. "Well, since Mr. Scuba agreed to give me a ride to the city, I'll just go with Mrs. Gregory later, you stay home and take a good rest"

"Okay! I guess you'll be home late, right?"

"I guess so!".

Hanna felt bored lying on bed for an hour without getting a sleep. She got herself ready for work. She took a taxi on her way to the store, an hour later. She was feeling much better as she slipped at the back while greeting the driver warmly, he was a middle-aged man. On the way they heard several ambulance-sirens that were so unusual and made her a little curious and luckily, the driver had an input.

"What a terrible day! Seems a lot of people were injured in the accident!" He snapped, eyes still on the road.

"Accident?" She prompted

"Yes, there was a huge accident earlier today! I heard it was terrible and they're still doing the rescue operation!"

"Oh! How horrible!" She gasped, before gazing outside sternly. Just at that minute, she remembered that her phone was off since last night, she tugged her bag and took it out, then turned it on, casually. To her surprise, there were several texts and voice mails, from John. She took a quick peek and her expression changed, confoundedly. She made an attempt to call him but there was no answer. "Sir, can you please take me to the hospital instead?" She asked.

"Yes young lady, everything okay?"

"I hope so!"

Arriving at Greenhill hospital, things were chaotic. The sight was totally sickening, she just stood outside for a while watching few doctors and nurses running in havoc, helping each other to carry the victims from the two ambulances parked outside.

Some were badly injured, some dead considering the way they covered their bodies. It was a terrible view and everyone around was in a bad mood. From a distance, at the massive hospital door, she spotted the short haired nurse--Cathy, talking to one of the EMTs. Hanna moved closer and waited for her until she

saw her in turn, and immediately dispersed the guy, then followed Hanna in a hurry.

"Hey Hanna!" She snapped, friendly as usual, just a little gloomy. "Dr. Martin is in the ER, as you can see things are not good today! But I'll let him know you're here if you want" she offered. How sweet, Hanna thought.

"Thanks Cathy, please do! It's important!"

"Okay. Bye!" She smiled and disappeared. Once herself, Hanna went to the waiting lounge facing the reception and took a seat, listening the fading sirens as the ambulances left the premise. She started growing impatient and restless as the minutes passed by, with no sign of John. But then again recalled that it was an emergency situation so decided to wait a bit longer, with several questions in her head. Just then she caught a glimpse of him jogging towards her at unnecessary speed, she stood up instinctively, and made no attempt to move until he reached few centimeters away from her. He was panting heavily as if he'd run a marathon, which in a way he did. His look was undescrivable, plunged straight to Hanna's eyes that were too baffled. Without saying a word, he pulled her for a tight embrace, too tight like he was going to lose her. And with that, she was even more confused, but not relentless. She allowed herself to melt in his arms until couldn't take it anymore, she revolted.

"Um-- John! I can't bre--" she stuttered and he quickly set her free. His eyes were dark, a mixture of agony and relief, and something else that Hanna couldn't quite understand.

"You're okay, right? You're not hurt anywhere?" He said, while inspecting her body as if she'd just come out of fire.

"I'm fine! I'm not hurt!" She replied, shocked, and he slowly relaxed, his hands on her shoulders, still staring at her. "You-- are you like that because of me?" She murmured softly but he remained silent, except for his intense gaze that never left hers. "Were you w--" she was cut short when suddenly felt his lips enveloping hers, intertwined into a passionate-yet-tender-kiss, sending a current down her spine, making everything around still and lifeless. She momentarily closed her eyes and let herself fly to the cloud nine, but her brain wasn't dull enough to realize that it was all wrong, a grave mistake, that she had to stop it despite the sweetness it brought, alerting every inch of her skin and the burning sensation it deciphered from the feeling of that indecent surprise. Without a second to decide, John released her, breathlessly. He looked her straight in the eyes as she strived to open hers in disbelief of what had just happened. He was strangely stoic, and Hanna completely the opposite, she nervously scanned the lobby and luckily no one was paying attention to them. Amidst all the tension, John got paged and before responding, Hanna said "I'm going to the store, you should go back to work!" She said in a confounded tone of voice, then left without looking back.

It was nothing, he just got carried away, he was worried, it was nothing but an impulse! Yes Hanna, that's it. Like a mantra, she kept convincing herself inwardly while pacing quickly to the exit.

Bumping to the fresh morning air mingled with cool sunlight, she finally got a chance to breathe, a very long breath before walking towards the same bench she used the day she found out about her pregnancy. She fell straight on it as if her legs had lost the mobility, so confused of the situation that she had no idea what to think of it. She remained still over there, her head blank, unable to think of anything except allowing her body to absorb the Greenhill breeze that came violently, causing a rustling and screeching sounds from the trees nearby. Brace yourself Hanna, you have a job to attend. An inner voice slapped her from the absentmindedness and right that moment she gathered the energy to get up, getting up just to find John standing right before her eyes, an impassive look on his face.

"I know a lot must be going on inside your head right now . . . " he said in a low voice, haltingly, he run a hand through his black hair with brown tints, seemingly distraught. With eyes wide-open, Hanna stared at him unblinkingly; Cold in the outside yet nervous inside, worried and scared of what he was about to reveal, she wasn't ready to hear any of his declaration. "Hanna I-
_"

"I'm leaving the country!" She snapped without letting him finish. "I'm going away John, very soon!" She added to cut him short, he was bewildered. Even she surprised herself.

"WHAT!" He exclaimed.

"I came to say goodbye! And to thank you for everything you've done for me! I-- I'm really late for work right now so I'm going first!" She blabbered with a plastic smile and left in a hurry,

leaving John totally dumbfounded, glaring at her, running rather than walking. He couldn't say a word.

* * * *

"What do you mean you're moving out Christian? This is your house and no one is leaving!" Theresa snapped as the whole family gathered for dinner that night. "This is all your fault James, why did you have to buy him an apartment?" She glared at her husband who silently chewed his pasta, ignoring Theresa's protest.

"Mother relax! I'm not leaving the country or anything, I'm just moving to my own flat, that's all!" Chris replied.

"Why don't you let your son do what he wants Theresa? He's a grown-up man now, not a little boy. He needs space!" Mr. Ashton finally spoke, he was a man of few words and mostly wise.

"Oh I don't know, this doesn't feel right! This house is big enough for everyone. Anyways, what other news do you have to tell us? I just hope it's not another unpleasant surprise!" She asked Chris who exchanged few knowing glances with Abbie before letting her speak.

"Um. . . my mother asked Chris to be in charge of our business here! She wants him to manage everything we have in Lycos." Abbie said, then followed a reign of silence from everyone.

"Wow! That calls for a toast! Isn't that great honey?" Theresa said pointedly at James whose eyes never left Chris. Even Caro did the same, as if expecting some further input from him.

"Hold on a sec mother, it's only a proposal for now, I haven't said yes." He cleared the tension. "I don't know anything about running a hotel, so I'm still thinking"

"Which is a waste of time! You're very smart Chris, I'm sure you'll learn quickly and do a great job. I believe in you!" Abbie said and received an agreeable nod from Theresa.

"It's true son! Unless you have other reasons, experience isn't an issue, what counts is the will. You're brilliant, you've got the power, the knowledge, its only a matter of time and how far you're willing to learn. When you have a gut, nothing can stop you!" said James himself and for once, the whole table agreed with him. It left Chris with a lot to think of about the offer, which felt like a great opportunity of a lifetime.

CHAPTER 17

"What if it was a huge misunderstanding? Hanna's sudden decision to leave?" Carolyn asked Chris when she suddenly invaded his room, in a weird mood.

He frowned, then swung around his chair, abandoning his work on the laptop to face his sister who was already seated on his bed.

"What kind of misunderstanding?" He sat cross-legged, looking relentless.

She swallowed hard. "I don't know, I just thought maybe she saw or heard something that made her angry. . . sometimes the reality is not what it seems Chris!" She snapped. Unlike her usual self, she was so different that day, as if she felt the urge to warn him about his rash decisions and judgement.

"It doesn't change a thing!" He said. "If she really loved me as she claimed, she would've trusted me! And waited to clear the so called misunderstanding! Wait--" he paused.

"What?"

"Where is this all coming from? Is there something you know that I don't?"

"Um. . . me?"

"Yes, you! I get this impression that you're hiding something about her. But it doesn't matter, I'm done with her! So, this conversation is officially over!"

"Really? Are you sure you're done with her?"

"Positively!"

"Okay, as you wish!" She gave up. "So, are you going to accept that offer?" There emerged a new subject.

"Maybe. . . father was right, I won't know unless I try! I think I'll take the chance!"

"Great! Good luck to you!" She said half-heartedly, Caro was not thrilled with the idea, she had a feeling that it wouldn't end well. She got up, ready to leave, but stopped to say, "I really hate this crap, but for once I want to believe in it?"

"Crap? What crap?"

"That everything happens for a reason!" She said, with extreme displeasure. "What a bullshit" She uttered while closing the door behind, leaving him all broody. He pulled his bedside drawer and slipped out Hanna's cellphone, stared at it for a good while, thoughtful. He connected a charger and turned it on, met a picture of them together as a wallpaper. Once again he tried to draw a pattern and failed, until something hit his head, and reluctantly, he drew letter C, it unlocked. He exhaled sharply, as if he didn't expect it. He went through the inbox, and found only his messages, the call logs, was almost the same, he swallowed convulsively and immediately turned it off.

* * * *

First couple of days, after Hanna's separation from Chris were pretty hard. But in time she learned to live with it, and along came Doctor Martin, the man who appeared like an angel sent from above. In a short time, he brought back her smile and made her forget the great ordeal she was facing, instead she felt everything was going to be okay.

However, coming to knowledge that the very same man was probably harbouring other special feelings for her, made Hanna a little scared. She didn't want to face it, hence decided to run away from him.

John kept calling her for two days in a row, with no luck. Hanna was determined to stay away from him, Hoping they never see each other again. She kept herself busy preparing her trip back to Australia, even though a part of her kept yelling that she was being harsh and unfair.

"Is something bothering you? You've been picking your food for a while now!" Sarah snapped at her during dinner. Startlingly, she looked down her plate and found it still-full, then stared at her mother across the dining table. "Why? Is it about the trip? If you don't want to go then stay!"

"No mom, it's not that! Actually, I'm going to study in Paris, according to aunt" Hanna replied. "I'll be with Victor, you know how much he fancy cooking! I'm kind of excited!" She let out a forced smile, Sarah frowned.

"If that's the case, then why are you so gloomy?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired I guess"

"Okay. Finish your food and go to sleep then! I still can't get over the fact that we nearly got into that accident! It could've been us you know?"

"I know!" Hanna prompted, with an obvious indifference. Her mind was completely elsewhere. "Mom, Is it possible for a man to like a pregnant-woman who isn't actually carrying his child?" She asked without thinking much, and realized it was pretty weird one, judging on Sarah's immediate reaction. She set things straight, "Um-- it's just a scenario, no need to freak out" she smiled.

"I'm not sure, but why not? . . . I've seen men falling for single mothers and vice versa so I can't say it's impossible. Besides, nobody chooses whom to love-- it just happens!" She answered calmly, before sipping some water.

"Oh, I see!"

"Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Huh? None! Um-- I'll clear the table!" She got up abruptly and grabbed the plates, Sarah's gaze stalked her. Before getting away, she told her;

"I wish you'd trust me a little more Hanna, I hope you will someday" she smiled tenderly.

It was as if she could see through her, and there was a readable pain in her tone, but there wasn't a thing to be done. It wasn't easy for Hanna to open up and tell her everything, that fine line from maternal relationship to a friendship was still hard to cross.

Next day at work, She spent browsing the culinary school she was about to join, *Le Cordon bleu*, one of the best in France. Approaching her dream, moving to another country, starting a new life, while expecting a child, were some of the overwhelming Adieu's inside. She was ecstatic and nervous at the same time, but yet couldn't stop marvelling the thought, even though at some point she found it supercilious. She could've opted for a cheaper option, like studying in Lycos for instance, but on other hand it was necessary to be wary of the latter. *What would the Ashtons do once find out there was another one of their kind, and from a poor breed? Abortion?* Hanna shuddered at the thought. She wrapped her belly instinctively and breathed deeply, pressing her lips together in a relaxed manner.

Not knowing how or when, to her surprise there was an audience at the store, a familiar man with possessive skills of arriving unnoticed.

"Were you really going to ignore me until the end?" John asked, looking stunning as always, hands in his pant pockets, slightly mad.

She scowled. "Haven't I made it clear that I don't want to see you again?" She snapped, hardly keeping up her composure from his destabilizing stare. She swallowed convulsively. "What do you want?"

"The usual. . ." He announced, calmly. Hanna pointed at the transparent refrigerator at the other end. He made a move

towards the fridge, still gazing at her intensely, a bit disappointedly. He served himself before returning to the counter "Seems like running away is the only solution to your problems!" He said blatantly while nabbing a single bill from his wallet, then handed it to her. She feigned a total deafness, despite the fact that her face was so relenting that it cracked a faint smile from John. "Okay then, I'll do as you want!" He declared in a resigned manner, before finding his way out. For once Hanna showed a slight interest, her lips parted as if she wanted to say something, then hesitated, until he reached the glass door, ready to get out.

"Why did you do it?" She asked, loudly. He turned around immediately with an impassive look.

"I think you know the reason!" He snapped, then paced back nonchalantly. "Isn't it the reason why you're pushing me away?" He narrowed his eyes, enquiringly.

"I don't know what you're talking about" Nervously, Hanna bit her lower lips while sighing softly, unable to meet his eyes. Seconds passed, and only silence filled the store. She started to feel uneasy hence decided to look up to him, just to meet his scrutinizing face.

"I like you Hanna-- I liked you from the very first time I saw you. I thought it was a simple interest at first but slowly everything changed" he confessed, but there was no response. Hanna was just staring at him, mouth agape. He continued, "When I heard about the accident, I went crazy! I've never felt that scared in my entire life. So I realized, I love this woman, I don't want to lose

her!"

"You're crazy!" She uttered but he reacted with indifference. "You barely know me, and in case you've forgotten, I'm pregnant! I'm carrying another man's child!" She added with her most serious tone of voice.

"So what? Does being pregnant means the end of life? Does that change the fact that you're beautiful and most lovely-woman I've ever met? I don't care about any of that Hanna!"

"Well I do! It does matter to me. . . I'm sorry, but I can't return your feelings! And I don't think I need to point out my reasons!"

"I know!" He prompted, made her a little surprised. "I know you still love the father of your child, and trust me I'm not expecting you to feel the same way towards me"

"Good! It's all clear then!"

"No, something is still unclear! Hanna, my feelings are mine. I don't understand why I have to stay away from you just because I love you! You even made up a story about leaving the country?"

"I didn't make it up, it's the truth!" She urged and at that moment, another customer walked in. They had to stop for a while. John took advantage of the break to gulp his sweaty ginger tonic, vividly distraught.

Hanna couldn't resist stealing few glances of him while attending the cash registry, contemplating everything he had just told her. It was her first time receiving such a brazen

confession, from such a beautiful and intelligent stranger she'd just met couple of days ago. He was like a free gift she thought undeserving, and to sum up her prior experience in love, it was too enormous. She was too occupied to notice that they were once again alone and John was looking at her closely as if wondering what kept her absentminded. She blinked, startled.

"Hey, I hate that face! I didn't ask you to marry me you know?" He said teasingly, and luckily it worked. Hanna laughed. "There! That's the face I like" he smiled.

"John, I'm being serious! I'll be gone in a month at most"

"And I'll be gone in three months!" He snapped. Hanna frowned, confused. "Yes Hanna, my fellowship will be over soon. . . and I'll fly back to Baltimore, I remember telling you this, no?"

"Yeah you did, but I didn't know it would be that soon. . . So then, you see? We'll both go our separate ways!"

"And so what? You think the distance can stop us?"

"Yes?"

"Oh Hanna. We're not cavemen you know! I may not be super-rich, but I can afford going places. In fact, I think I'm going to develop a new hobby, travelling!" He said, with a playful gleam in his eyes. Again, Hanna stifled a laugh. "What's so funny?"

"There's really no stopping you, is there? I mean, you're so stubborn!" She bit her lower lips, "So are you saying that you'll find me wherever I go?"

"Why not?"

"You're crazy! So very crazy!"

Eventually, they started laughing and arguing like they usually did, and in the end, the turmoil was over. It was as if nothing unusual had happened between them. John managed to reassure her that he'd never do anything she wasn't up for, and made it clear that he'd be with her until the end. But refused to be her friend, claiming he never made friends with pretty girls like her. In turn, Hanna asked what kind of relationship would that be, and he simply said that there's no need to label their relationship, it was least important.

Later that evening, Hanna was at the top. Her face was colorful, painted with a bright smile as she arrived home and found her mother in the kitchen. She warmly greeted her.

"I guess something good did happen!" said Sarah, her look unsure. "Why are you so happy?"

"Because I'm happy!" She replied with a rhythm of a song, but Sarah was still staring at her, waiting. "Oh mom, I don't know if I should tell you this or not" she sighed, finally took the discussion serious.

"I'm all ears!" She snapped, folding arms across her chest.

"Well. . ." she stuttered hesitantly, then took another sigh. "Someone is in love with me, he told me so today!" She closed her eyes, ashamed to see her mother's reaction. Then decided to open them after a long silence, and found her smiling.

"Who is he? Do I know him?" She asked, with excitement.

"Mom? Aren't you surprised or anything?"

"Do I have to? Why? You're young and beautiful, so it's only natural that someone likes you. Besides, I already knew that there's a new someone in your life!"

"You did? How?" She queried, a little surprised. Sarah shrugged without saying anything except smiling broadly. "Anyway, that's not important, mom I'm pregnant! How can a guy love me in this state?"

"Why not? Is that a defect or something? It's just an unborn child, does being a mother stop anyone to love or being loved? Darling this is twenty-first century, do I have to remind you this?" Sarah uttered with enthusiasm, leaving Hanna completely dumbstruck.

"Are you really my mother! I hope you're not possessed!"

"Oh give me a break! So, does he know you're pregnant? Where did you meet him?" She asked while resuming her cooking. Like a cue, Hanna took a seat at the counter and poured a glass of water, then sipped a bit. She told her the whole story, including her visit to Lycos which was still hidden until then. "So, you even saw Chris?"

"I did. He was with Abbie! I couldn't do anything, I just hid away" she answered in a low tone of voice, she got hurt whenever she recalled that moment. Tears threatened to fill her eyes, but she immediately repressed them with a quick sniff.

"Anyway, it's all in the past now. From here onwards, I'm only going to think of my baby, I'll study really hard, I'll make sure to excel in all that I do. I don't want him to lack anything"

"Or a she!" said Sarah joyfully.

"Yes mom, or a she! When I come back here, I won't be the same Hanna they use to know, I'll never let anyone look down on us! Not even the great Ashtons!".

That was Hanna's first declaration of future. There was a hideous sparkle in her eyes as she said those words, a mixture of anger and bitterness out of betrayal she believed done to her. She wanted to use the opportunity of having a rich father to rise high, she wanted to live her dream for once, and at that moment, she had a reason to fight, her unborn child.

"I just want you to be happy and healthy honey. Forget about the Ashtons, just go and live your life!"

"I know mom!" She smiled at her.

"Okay tell me about the doctor, is he handsome? Why don't you invite him over for dinner!"

"Come on mother! I've told you everything already. I'm not calling him over, I don't want him to think that I'm leading him on. After all he already knows that I'm leaving"

"You told him? And what did he say?" Sarah asked curiously, and for the moment Hanna reminisced his words that he'd follow her wherever she would go. She couldn't resist laughing. Deep inside she knew it was just an empty promise, but it

strangely melted her heart. "Hey, I'm talking to you!" Her mother barked.

"I think the potatoes are burning!" She managed to divert her attention and intelligently used the chance to save herself from the bombardment. She rushed to her room.

Days went on, and Hanna carried on with her unnamed relationship with Dr. Martin. They were both okay with the situation. They had meals together, several dates, plenty of evening walks and one weekend getaway. John never mentioned his proposal again, and not even once did he try to make any indecent move on her, she always felt safe around him, maybe too comfortable that it made it too hard for her when the time to leave had finally arrived.

Again, he promised that he'd never let her feel his absence, that he'd be wherever she'd be. She just hugged him and kissed his cheek before saying goodnight. She left the next day.

* * * *

FOUR YEARS LATER. The sound of a hand phone buzzing filled the campy-office inside the Lycos University Hospital, Cardiology centre building. The papers were scattered all over, as if the owner had quite a night doing a search and seizure. There was a white coat hanged by the chair with Dr. Martins name tag embodied on it. At the table, lied several research files, the

computer which was still on, the blood pressure cuffs and the vibrating phone. Just then, Dr. Martin appeared from the other side and picked the phone with a smile, upon identifying the caller.

"Hi" he muttered, with a husky voice. It was an early morning.

"Let's see, you're sleeping in the office again! What do I do with you Dr. Strange? I can't believe you haven't found a house yet!" A beautiful voice from the end of the line replied, naggingly. He giggled, amused. "You're laughing, seriously? Tell me, don't they pay you well over there? You're a prominent doctor, why don't you just go back to Baltimore instead? Seems like Lycos has lost it's touch"

"Are you done hysterical queen? Can I talk now?" He asked, teasingly, before taking a seat with a yawn.

"Yes. For now!" She urged.

"Great. Like I said before, I won't find a place to stay, until you give me the answer!"

"Again with the emotional-blackmail? Aren't you too old for this Dr. Martin? Fine. I'll give you the answer, in twenty-four hours"

"Oh finally! When is your flight?"

"Tonight!"

"I'll be waiting! I miss you like crazy! How's is Alvin?"

"Excited! He can't wait to see his grandma. He misses you, and so do I"

"I'll see you tomorrow then!"

"Yes. Tomorrow!" She stressed.

"Hanna?"

"Yes?"

"Are you sure you're ready to come back? I know you understand what I mean!"

"I'm very sure John! And don't worry, I'm not holding any grudge. I'll get going now, Aunt is here!"

"Say hello for me. I love you!"

"I know! Bye!"

CHAPTER 18

"Good morning mother!" Hanna smiled. She'd just gone out of her bedroom, with a worn-out look, probably from a jet-lag.

"Good morning honey, did you sleep well?" Replied Sarah, as usual she was already up for a day, with her apron hanging by the waist.

"As you can see, rise and shine! Oh I missed this smell. . . crunchy onion-pancakes? It's exactly what I need!" She uttered with enthusiasm, while taking a seat at the kitchen counter. Minutes later, the breakfast was served, then Maria and a young girl, about fourteen or fifteen joined them. "Hi Maria? Couldn't believe that you actually quit your job at the Ashton's to work for my mom!"

"Oh well, what can I say. . . I love working with Sarah. So when she told me that I could even stay with here with my little sister, I didn't even have to think twice" Maria said shyly.

"Oh no girl, I never asked you to work for me! You cried on the phone, remember?" Sarah intruded, and it was a cue for a long discussion that made Hanna laugh audibly most of the time. Looking at them, bickering, made her realize how much she'd missed those moments.

She'd actually arrived at Greenhill a night before, after the long four years or so. It was a huge surprise for Sarah since Hanna never announced her return beforehand. She wanted to surprise everyone. And it worked, they were all shocked to see

how beautiful and worldly she'd become, with her handsome little-boy by her side.

"Is Alvin still asleep Hanna?" Gwen, Maria's little sister asked her, almost startingly as everyone else seemed occupied with the unfamiliar conversation.

"Yes dear! He must've been so tired, especially after the game match you two had last night!" Hanna raised a wry eyebrow at her and she smiled shyly. "I think he likes you already, since you've become his gaming- partner!"

"I like him too, he's cute! And he plays pretty well" Gwen replied, with her smooth girly-voice. She and Hanna found themselves in their own discussion, about Alvin and his little gadgets.

Later that day, after little stroll around Greenhill, saying hi to some friends including her old boss, Mr. Scuba, Hanna found a time to talk to her mother alone. They sat at the canvas-chairs in the front old-barren yard that was full of lawn-grass and flowers by then, completely different from how it was when she left it.

It was mid-spring, almost everywhere was covered with serene shades of green and the sky was crystal-blue accompanied with silver clouds.

"I'm so happy to have you back honey! I waited for so long to see you and my grandson" Sarah snapped. Despite the time, she was still naturally beautiful in her slender body that needed not to workout, for she worked nonstop her entire life. "I'm so

proud of you dear, your son is growing nicely, you've finished your studies, I couldn't ask for more!"

"Oh mom, stop being sentimental now! You are going to make me cry" she sniffed, then smiled as they both wiped their sadness. "I'm also proud of myself! It wasn't easy mom, at times I wanted to quit, I felt it was so unfair for me to deal with everything alone. . . but you gave me courage, everyone around me did, aunt Victoria, my cousin Victor and mostly especially John, I don't know what I'd have done without him"

"From what you've told me, I think John is a very good man, I'd love to finally meet him!"

"You will mom, don't worry. To think he doesn't even know that I'm here, he'll be shocked when he sees me tomorrow" Hanna said, amused to her own thoughts as she stared into space.

"You didn't tell him?"

"No, he thinks I'm still in Australia!" She replied with a witty smile.

"And you two are not dating yet? Why? don't you like him?"

"I do like him mother, a lot. . .Who wouldn't? But we're not dating, YET!" She said with a blush and at that moment, Gwen approached holding Alvin's hand, a very handsome little boy in his white shorts, red polo-shirt with matching converse. "Hey Mr. Alvin, had some fun with Gwen?" Hanna pulled him to her laps and the little boy nodded agreeably. "Do you like it here?"

"I do! Are we going to live here?" He queried, seriously. Hanna

exchanged glances with Sarah and Gwen, a little taken aback.

"I don't know Alvin, why? Would you like to stay?"

"Yes, Gwen is nice, she made me a kite. . . but It flew away!" He pouted momentarily. "Can we stay a little longer? She promised to make me another one!"

"Of course baby, we can stay for as long as you want, only if you promise that you won't make any trouble"

"I promise!" He said in a childish way.

"And no playing video games at night" Hanna added, and for a second Alvin frowned, but he then agreed. They all laughed.

"Okay, now let's get you some snacks!"

"It's alright Hanna, I'll take care of it" Gwen volunteered, happily.

"Thanks Gwen, just give him some fruits, and no matter how much he tricks you into junk foods, don't fall for it!"

"Don't worry, I've got this" she replied, smilingly. "Let's go little man!" She held his hand and both left.

"Gwen is used to babysitting, you can relax! She was also taking care of their sick grandmother until she died a year ago. Poor thing has suffered a lot in such a young age, that's why I asked Maria to come and live here, together with her. I hope you're not upset" Sarah broke the silence

"Upset? Are you crazy Ms. Sarah, I was relived to hear that you're not alone. They can stay for as long as they need!" She

reassured her mother who smiled kindly. "Oh I forgot something, Alvin is allergic to strawberries! I hope Gwen hasn't given him any!" She quickly rose from her seat and run inside, Sarah followed.

Luckily, Gwen was just slicing some red apples while talking to the boy about their flight. Also, it turned out that they run out of strawberries in the house, hence no harm was done. Relieved, Hanna and her mother retired to the living room.

"So, he has a strawberry allergy?" Sarah queried, seemingly intrigued. Hanna nodded her head, perplexed. "Christian is also allergic to strawberries!" She added, and slowly Hanna's face started to unfold.

"Yes mother! He took after his father!" She prompted. They both sent their eyes towards the kitchen where Alvin was giggling brightly in response to Gwen's tickling.

"Do you still think of him?" Sarah asked in a low voice once they resumed back the attention.

"I'll be a lying if I say I don't. He's my son's father mom, it's only natural I think of him from time to time!" She answered, a little sadly.

"I'd say most of the time, I could almost see Chris through him, the resemblance is real honey!" Sarah continued, "Don't you want to know what Chris has been up to this whole time"

"No mom! I don't want to know" she prompted quickly, determined, then sighed softly, "What are you trying to say

mom?" Hanna glared at her.

"Do you really want to hear my opinion?"

"I do. . ."

"I think it's about time you let him know, that he has a son!" Sarah said brazenly, and immediately Hanna turned pale. It was a tough subject. "Besides, if you're going to live in Lycos, the possibility of meeting him again is very high."

The awful-silence prevailed for a long minute, Hanna swallowed hard as if her head was drifting away to the clouds. But she took a long breath afterwards, a sign that she was back to the planet earth. "I thought a lot before coming here mother!" She remarked haltingly. "And before speaking of rights, at least stop being oblivious about what I've been through all this time, and please stop taking his side so recklessly!" She snapped at her, in a low yet pissed tone of voice.

Startled, Sarah objected. "I'm not taking anyone's side Hanna. . .stop acting like a child, will you? This isn't just about the two of you, it also concerns Alvin! The boy needs to know his father, he has every right in the world to, no matter the circumstances!"

"I'm very much aware of that, but now is not the right time" Insistingly, Hanna said. "I don't want Alvin to grow up without knowing him, but I need to be prepared, I need to be able to protect my son from anything and anyone! That's why I need a little time"

"Protect him from what? His own father?" Sarah asked, a

confused look on her face.

"Yes! from him and anyone else. . . mother it's the Ashton's we're taking about, they have money, they're powerful! Before I make any decision, I need to be wary of my legal and even economic position!"

"I understand honey! But you also shouldn't forget that you're an Anderson, even though you refuse to accept your status. . . you can be very powerful if you want to!" Sarah stipulated, and for a moment they both laughed. It was mainly due to that remark, about being powerful. She was right though, Hanna's father owned a very prestigious law firm in the country, and her grandfather was a prominent old man in the export business with great connections. He was the one who strongly opposed Sarah's relationship to his son, since she was a simple maid without a name. He was very strict and ruthless, but when Hanna was born, he wanted her to be raised in his family, by the woman he'd chosen for his son and not Sarah. That's when things fell apart and Sarah decided to let Victoria, raise Hanna instead, it was the only way to stop his harassment towards them.

"Oh mom, don't even remind me of that. . . The nerve of that old man, Can you imagine how ecstatic he was when he found out I have a son, he flew all the way to Australia!" Hanna said, casually.

"He's your grandfather Hanna! He may be snobbish but you still have his blood." Sarah remarked.

"After everything he did to you? I can't believe it. Are you an angel or something?"

"I'm just a mother! I don't agree with what he did. . . but I'm sure he had his reasons. He must've been happy, he always wanted a grandson"

"And he never had one, right? Actually, I heard my father is getting a divorce, did you know his wife can't have children?" Hanna found a chance to confront her mother at last.

"Um. . . yes!" Sarah answered, but before her tackling further, Alvin intruded and the conversation stopped right there.

* * * *

HANNA left Greenhill late in the morning, the next day. She rode a bus to Lycos and arrived around twelve in the afternoon. Despite the time passed, everything was the same in her eyes. She took a short walk from the bus stop just to embrace the familiarity. The weather was nice, the spring-sun shined faintly, and the bustling city noise that stifle her smile as she hauled for a taxi and head straight to Lycos university hospital.

She peeked outside, through the transparent window. The university buildings kept sliding back as the car accelerated in a constant moderate speed. The sight brought back some old memories, the time she was once a freshman, the moment she shared with Chris as her only friend. A soft sigh escaped her lungs as she leaned back against the seat, pressing her lips

together momentarily as a way to cease the reminiscing.

"Just drop me over there!" She asked the driver and a moment later she took off the car. She wanted to call John in advance, but decided against it. She chose to surprise him instead.

She head to the building right away.

"Do you have an appointment? Dr. Martin isn't on duty today" she was told once arrived at the reception.

"I know! Actually, I'm not here as a patient!" Hanna replied.

"Eh?" The reception nurse prompted.

"I mean. . . I'm his girlfriend, I just arrived from abroad and I was hoping to-- you know, surprise him?" She lied, and her words drew some attention from the other nurses. They scanned her up and down as if confirming something. Luckily, she was dressed to impress that it didn't leave any room for an ill comment. "Well, I'll just give him a call if it's a bother. . ." she smiled kindly before slipping a hand into her designer-purse.

"Wait--" the nurse snapped. "Go to the sixth floor, room F15. It's his office!"

"Oh, thank you!" Hanna grinned before turning her heels, leaving the intoxicating French-perfume scent that obviously gave them a room to discuss her.

Few minutes of elevator ride was enough to clear her mind, and ready to make her decision regarding something that was

probably going to affect her life from that point. She knocked twice when reached the door with Dr. Martin's name stuck on it. A fine familiar voice prompted her to go in, she smiled. She slowly opened the door, poked her face before emerging wholly. A pair of wide surprised eyes welcomed her and she just stood still by the door, smilingly.

"No, tell me I'm not seeing things now! HANNA?" John exclaimed loudly, already on his toes.

"Hi, Dr. Strange!" She replied.

"You-- wait. . ." He paused, in awe, he then started laughing while shaking his head as if she'd got him, leaning his both hands on the table top. "You really enjoy surprising me, don't you?"

"And I can tell you quite enjoy my surprises, don't you?" She answered with an arched eyebrows, while walking nonchalantly towards his table, which was in huge mess. For a moment, they stared each other with a bright smile. Until he left his spot to give her a long lasting embrace. "I missed you!" She whispered, dropping her purse on the floor.

"Needless for me to say, because I told you a countless times!"

"It doesn't hurt to repeat though"

"I missed you!" He said while inhaling an enchanting smell of her shampoo through her long wavy golden-hair. "And yes, I love this surprise!" He said while releasing her, only partially, as his hands kept encircling her waist and she his neck.

"I'm glad you do, because there's another one!" Hanna told him in a playful manner.

"Another one?"

"Yes!" She said, and looked into his anticipating eyes, calmly. She swallowed then pulled his head down in a swift. She planted her pink colored lips into his and kissed him without a warning, a short yet lingering kind of kiss. He was startled a little but remained composed despite his baffled face.

"What was that for?" He asked.

"It's a yes!"

"A yes?"

"Yes, a yes! Don't you remember I promised to give you the answer once I return. So, there! That was my answer. I'll be your girlfriend"

"WHAT?"

"I said I accept! Plus, I've already introduced myself as your girlfriend at the reception so--" she was cut short as he suddenly lifted her up in his arms, a smile all over his face. "Oh God! What are you doing John?"

"Finally! I've waited forever for this! Oh Hanna, you've made me the happiest man on earth. Damn it! I'm finally hearing those words! Thank you! Thank you!" He snapped happily.

"Okay Okay put me down already!" She said, gigglingly. "I think my doctor needs a shaving and a hair cut. . . Gosh! You're a total

mess, and so is your office!" She nagged him as soon as they settled.

"You're right! This week has been a hell, If I knew you were coming I'd have made myself presentable. When did you arrive? And why didn't you tell me?" He asked, resting his head comfortably while watching her roaming around his office casually.

"Two days ago. I went straight to my mother's, because I knew you'd make a fuss while you're already busy enough as it is!" She responded nonchalantly. She stopped by the glass window with Lycos university view from a far distance.

"I see. And your mother? How is she? It's crazy that I've never met her til date"

"I know right? She said exactly the same thing yesterday!" She said with a faint-smile, before walking back to her seat. "She's dying to meet you!"

"Me too. . ."

They exchanged few stories for over half an hour, during which John couldn't get his eyes off her. "Why are you looking at me like that?" She finally asked him, intrigued.

"You're so beautiful Hanna, I see you but I still can't believe you're actually here, as my girlfriend!"

"Are you being coy Dr. Strange?"

"I'm only stating the facts, I just want to take you away from

here!"

"And what's stopping you?" She raised a mischievous eyebrow.

"I'm not sure of your plans, that's all"

"Well. . . I'm meeting Victor in an hour, like I told you over the phone, he's already taking care of the restaurant renovation! So, I guess I'll have to leave right away. . . but, I'll catch up with you tonight. That is, if you're free!"

"Great! but how about lunch first?"

"Fine by me!" She agreed. Passing by the reception, Hanna gave the ladies a simple smile of gratitude before disappearing with her handsome doctor, without leaving any indifference. "You never cease to amaze me doctor, you've already made yourself a fan club!" She teased him as they climbed his black sedan.

"I'm not so sure about that, but I guess you have made quite an impression miss Anderson! You've really changed!"

"Really? How so?"

"You're transformed, sophisticated, confident, and very sexy!" He eyed her sideways and met her inquiring glare. "Okay, I take it back! You're not sexy!" He smiled while changing the gear, and Hanna simply shook her head, amused.

"You know, I haven't decided where to sleep tonight. Should I check in the hotel?" She asked him, but he fell silence. "I'd love to sleep at my boyfriend's place, but apparently, he doesn't have a house!" She continued to challenge him and as expected, her

remark stirred him a bit.

"Do you actually believe with your daily nagging I wouldn't have found a house by now?"

"Wow! So, you do have one huh?"

"Oh Hanna! How disappointing!" He feigned the offended and made her laugh audibly.

"Keep it up doctor. . ."

John turned some cool music on, and Hanna scrolled down her side-window to catch a perfect city view that made her sigh constantly. For once she started doubting whether she'd made a right choice or not, because she was going to live in that city in no time, the same city where her past lied still. She swallowed hard as the thoughts kept dominating her mind.

"I think we're almost there, Is this the place?" John's voice broke the spell.

"I think so!" She responded while looking around as he took a right turn leaving the main road.

"Hold on-- is the restaurant's name Aroma by any chance?"

"Yes, it's Aroma! You know it?"

"Of course, it's very old and popular!"

"Really? I guess we've got a great deal then"

"Right. Well. . . we're here! No wonder it's been closed for a while"

"Looks like a vintage, I love it already!" Hanna said as the car stopped and Victor appeared from the massive glass-doors of the restaurant. He was talking to someone on the phone. He was tall and lean, light-brown complexion; mixed ethnicity as his father was a black American.

He gave them a wave as they finally reached him, he was still on the phone which didn't take much longer. "Hi cousin, brother-in-law!" He disregarded Hanna and gave John a manly-hug. With a quick glance, one could tell how charming and down-to-earth he was.

"Brother-in-law? Seriously?" Hanna smirked cynically, and the two men laughed.

"It's okay Victor, don't mind her! I'm officially your brother-in-law as of today" said John, and she rolled her eyes expectantly.

"Woah! Wait-- am I missing something here?" Victor asked, while eyeing them both in turns, his slender face exposing his perfectly white teeth with his marvelous smile that drove French women crazy back in campus.

"Not much, it's just. . . we are officially dating!" Hanna announced proudly, pressing herself tightly beside John, and he responded naturally by slipping his hand behind her shoulders.

"Wow! Finally!" Victor snapped, he exaggerated slightly by clapping his hands as if he'd waited so long for the news. "I was really beginning to get bored with the story of you two being neither-friends-nor-lovers, it was so confusing!"

"Me too bro!" John said and immediately Hanna shoot him a cold glare, but he just shrugged his shoulders, grinningly. "Okay, why don't we get inside, it's quite chilly and someone is underdressed here" he suggested pointedly at Hanna who was wearing a simple mini-dress without even a pair of stockings. They all agreed.

Hanna was impressed with the restaurant, it was better than she'd hoped. She inspected the whole of it and came to agreement that it needed some few changes. About half an hour later, the designer they hired arrived, it was an elegant woman named Claire Stevens and she seemed quite passionate about her job, given the details and suggestions she gave them concerning the renovation that was to take place in a week time.

"Well. . . I think I like this design, it's just I don't want to complete destroy it's vintage style. It has it's charm!" Hanna snapped after a long discussion they had while making visible plans by pointing all that needed a change.

"I understand Cherie, but don't you think modernizing it would bring a huge impact, I think people would love some contemporary vibes!" Said Victor as they all sat down around the table. Hanna's eyes were still on the old paintings on the brick wall.

"Okay listen. . ." Claire intruded, they both lent her their attention. "I'm the designer, my job is to deliver what you envision. So then, I'm thinking of combining both your ideas together!"

"Exactly my thoughts!" John snapped after a long silence.

"Is that even possible?" Hanna asked.

"Yes! And believe me, you'll all be satisfied. It'll be modern, organic, and vintage!" Claire gave them few detailed examples of some things she'd do and it all seemed marvellous as she vividly explained through the plan-layout she had on the table. "Can you trust me enough to handle this?" She asked with confidence.

"Of course, I've seen what you did with Sophia's coffee shop!" Victor replied, a serious look in his eyes.

"Thanks, that means a lot!" She replied, almost blushing.
"Hanna?. . ." she turned towards her.

"Well. . . I guess so! I hope you do a great job Claire, it's our first deal, who knows? Maybe you'll get plenty after this!" Hanna replied, trying hard to loosen up a bit. She wasn't quite convinced and it was written all over her face. John squeezed her hand and she smiled faintly.

"With pleasure! Okay then, if there's nothing more to add, I'd like to excuse myself so that I can start working on this right away!" Claire said while standing up and collected her stuffs. "See you soon Hanna! Dr. Martin!" She gave them a handshake before Victor escorted her out.

"Hey, stop sulking! It'll be fine. . . I think she knows what she's doing so have a little trust in her!" John pulled her in his arms once alone.

"Oh I don't know John! I'm feeling so stressed already and we

haven't started anything yet!" She replied poutingly.

"I know, I'm sure that's how every business starts. Well I know what can cheer you up though!"

"I'm listening. . ." She quickly looked up to him.

"A delicious lunch"

"Seriously?"

"Oh please Hanna, I'm starving!"

"Okay, let's ask Victor to join us"

"Hell no! I'm not ruining your date in such a romantic afternoon!" Like a ghost, Victor snapped audibly with his mocking grin.

"It's okay, we don't mind!" John insisted.

"I'm sorry lovebirds, I've got plans of my own! Would you kindly leave so that I can close this place down?"

"Oh, whatever! I'm sure he has found himself a hot chick somewhere in a night club!" Hanna snapped while grabbing her purse. Her remark made the gentlemen stifle a bright laugh. "I'll give you a call later then. . . we still have a lot to discuss!" She added.

"Sure thing ma'am!" Victor said in an exaggerated manner. "Isn't she too tough for a chef? She looks like a ruthless businesswoman!" He whispered to John as they head outside.

"I know, right?" He responded in the same whisper.

"I heard that!" Hanna snapped at them. They exchanged a knowing glance with a smile.

A disturbing phone call reached Hanna from Greenhill, that Alvin fell sick. They had just finished the after-lunch-coffee, when she made a decision to go back.

"There's no way I'm letting you take a bus! I'll drive you there!" John made it clear since Hanna insisted otherwise. "And please try to calm down a bit, he'll be fine!"

"I'm trying! Don't you have to get back to the hospital though?" With much concern, she asked.

"I'll take care of that! Now get in!" He opened the passenger door and let her slide in. He quickly hit the high way and in less than three hours they arrived at Greenhill.

It was already sunset, almost dark when he pulled over in front of Hanna's house. She unbuckled the seatbelt immediately before getting off, John followed her lead. The front door was unlocked so she just pushed it and walked in, hurriedly.

"Mom! Mom" she called her, in a shout. Sarah appeared, almost in a heart attack. "Mom, how is my son? Is it serious?"

"He's asleep! Maria has just put him to my bedroom." Sarah said, while fastening her bathing robe, it seemed like she was about to shower. "It's not serious at all. . . I shouldn't have called you if you were going to react like this!"

"Oh God! I was so scared!" Hanna collapsed on the couch, with a long sigh and at that moment, John knocked the open door to remind her of his presence. "Damn, I almost forgot! Come in John" she snapped and her mother followed her gaze towards the door. He entered slowly.

"I didn't know we have a guest, I'll go and get dressed quickly!" Sarah said.

"Oh come on mom! Let me introduce you to two already. . John, meet my mother, Sarah!" Hanna made a formal introduction which wasn't too convenient to Sarah, she was a little embarrassed. They finally met and about to utter a greeting, when they both got paralyzed suddenly, as they got a clear look of each other's face.

"Wait--" Sarah snapped, haltingly. "I know you. . . John?"

He too, had the same knowing-look. "Nanny Sarah?" He shouted, joyfully. There was a pleasant surprised-look in both faces that left Hanna confused. "I can't believe this, is it really you!"

"Okay! Let's see. . . you two know each other?" Hanna demanded.

"Of course! He's a childhood friend of Chris! Oh my son, Look at you! So handsome and your face hasn't changed a bit" Perfectly oblivious of the situation, Sarah hugged him tenderly, he was so ecstatic, they both were. Except Hanna, who was completely dumbfounded by such a terrifying twist. *Christian's friend?*, she wondered.

CHAPTER 19

Hanna tried so hard to contemplate the situation and so did John. The same John that Christian spoke of; as his best childhood friend, the friend he'd been longing for, was actually the very same man sitting beside her. What's even worse was the fact that she had to find out just the exactly day she decided to accept his feelings after a long time of doubts and hesitation.

The wind rustled capriciously as they sat silently inside John's car. No one dared to utter a word for a good while until he let out a resigned sigh. "So, what you're saying is that, Alvin is Christian's son?" He queried calmly, it was more of a confirmation than an actual question.

"Yes. He's the father!" Hanna replied without looking at him. "I think you should go now, I-- I really need to be alone" she attempted to open the door.

"Hanna--"

"John please, just for tonight! Let me be!"

"Okay. . .you have a point, this is a bit too much for anyone" He prompted, his expression unreadable.

Hanna nodded her head then left without looking back. She went to her room directly, after bidding everyone goodnight. Her face lightened as she walked in and saw her beloved son lying on bed like a little angel. She paced closer, lied half-way next to him, and started stroking his hair gently.

She stared at his sleeping face proudly as if he was her best comfort, then planted a small kiss on his tiny forehead. The boy moved slightly in response of Hanna's gesture, before returning to his dreamland.

Hanna tried, but failed to find some sleep that night, hence decided to grab a bottle of wine from one of her suitcases and head to the kitchen. She pulled a stool and placed herself at the counter to drink the red liquid that would've tasted heavenly if it weren't for the hellish-mood she was in.

Sitting alone in the dark, thinking of the Mysterious fate that kept dragging her back to the past. She gulped a huge sip straight from a bottle then brushed her hair messily with her fingers when the lights went on suddenly and Sarah appeared, in a night dress.

"I knew it was you, but I didn't know you'd be drinking" she said while making her way to the kitchen.

"You're still up?" Hanna asked lazily, her eyes down as if nothing interested her anymore. Sarah ignored her question, instead she started fixing a cup of rosemary-tea for herself. "Why bother with tea ms. Sarah? You can just share this magnificent French-wine with me" she spouted in a drowsy voice.

"No thank you! You know very well that I don't fancy those kind of drinks"

"Suit yourself!" She consented. The silence resumed, only the stirring spoon in the mug filled the room with a clinking sound.

"Mom, how is he doing?" Hanna muttered all of a sudden.

"Who?"

"Christian!" She raised her gaze. "I don't think I can suppress my curiosity now, So how is he? Is he married? No, probably not. . . he's not the type to marry so early! What does he do?" She talked nonstop with a silly smile.

"Okay, one question at a time honey!" Sarah snapped, before pulling a stool for a seat. "I'm not sure why you're asking this just now, but I'm going to answer you either way" she paused with a short sigh. "He's doing fine, according to Maria. He's not married yet, but he's still with Abbie and he's even managing her family business!"

Hanna's face was sullen and motionless, her hands gripping the bottle. "I see. . ." she said calmly.

"Now it's my turn, Does it disturb you that John and Christian are not strangers? Does it affect your feelings for him now?" her mother queried, her eyes constantly fixed on hers.

Hanna took her time to reply, "No. On the contrary, I want to be happy! I deserve to be! And I believe John is the one for me, only him! So then, after tonight everything will change"

"Oh dear, I'm not so sure of that. . .all I know is that you can't face the future if you haven't come to terms with your past; it'll always haunt you" said Sarah in a strange way, as if referring to herself. Then smiled sweetly, "Did you really accept John as your boyfriend?"

"I did. . ."

"You did?" She tilted her head slightly.

"Yes mom, I love him, that's why I want to be with him"

"Okay, if you say so" Sarah relented, even though her eyes were filled with doubts.

"Well. . . I'm going to bed now, you should do the same Ms. Sarah" she got up, a little tipsy, she wasn't so good with alcohol.

"Okay, you better watch your step. Good night!"

Morning arrived and Hanna decided to pay John a visit to the hotel he was staying. He looked stunned as he set his eyes on her, at the doorway while holding a cellphone to his ear; he was on an important call it seemed.

"Okay, you can use a bypass procedure. . . oh yes, if it seems too complicated just consult professor Maxwell. . . Ah, is that so? Well just send the file to me, I'll have to read it first. . . it's okay, no problem" he hung up then stifled a smile. "What a nice surprise, come in" he told her and she walked in.

"Was that from work?" She casually asked.

"No, just a former colleague" he paced towards the coffee table and closed his Mac-book.

"I'm glad you called, unless I wouldn't know you're still here!" Hanna said, her eyes scanning his classic hotel-room before staring back at him.

"I'm glad I did!" He prompted, playfully. "Were you peeking around just now? Why. . .are you hoping to find someone here?"

"Hah, What? Don't tempt me Dr. Strange! I might start flipping things upside down to uncover your little affair" she answered, with a mischievous tone.

"Affair? Oh-oh that's offensive!" He grimaced. For once they both laughed, but the fun was only short-lived as they turned serious immediately while looking at each other, still standing.

"About yesterday. . ." she said haltingly, "I'm very sorry, I shouldn't have sent you away like that" she added.

"It's okay, we were both shocked" he smiled. John had a way of making someone feel better right away in any situation, and his choice of being a doctor wasn't a mere coincidence. "You do know that they don't install these sofas in hotels for nothing, right? Why don't we sit down now?" He teased her and brought her brightest smile back. Once seated, the awkwardness prevailed, as if no one knew what to say first. But as always, John initiated the talk. "Hanna, I know I promised I'd wait until you're ready to talk about Alvin's father, right?"

"Yes, I remember"

"Well, after what we've found out yesterday I don't think I can keep that promise! I want to know the story, to understand it. . . do you think you can tell me everything?"

"Yes John, that's why I'm here!" She answered after a little silence. She breathed audibly then tried to sit comfortably as he

stayed calm, elbows rested on his both knees correspondingly. "Chris and I became friends as soon as I moved to Lycos, he was the only person I felt comfortable with while adjusting to that new life which wasn't as great as I expected. . ." she started, then explained her experience in Ashton's residence and everything she went through while living there. She ended up telling John the whole truth about her feelings for Chris at that time and the way things ended up. "What happened that night may be an accident, but I'd never think of it as a mistake. . . thanks to that, I got my precious son. So I don't have any regret" she paused, as if gathering the courage to reach the crucial point. "John, I know this is not what you'd imagined, you're probably more confused than I am. . . so, if by any chance. . . you have a second thought about our relationship, I'll understand! I know all this is so hard to take in"

The whole while she was talking, John was attentively listening without uttering a word. His face was relaxed, almost stoic that it made Hanna somewhat uneasy of whatever on his mind. After a minute of a grim quietness, he finally smiled, before speaking. "You know it's been less than twenty-four hours since you accepted being my girlfriend, right?" He paused. "I can't believe you're trying to break up with me already! Am I that boring miss?" he raised a wry, yet inquiring eyebrow. Hanna looked at him, dumbfounded.

"Breaking up? John I--" she stifled a laugh when she realized that he was making fun of her "JOHN!" She exclaimed and threw a puffy- pillow at him, he caught it right away as they both laughed for a moment.

Later, he moved close to her, sat in the coffee-table and held her two hands, then looked straight to her eyes. "I'll never let you go, unless you tell me to" he said tenderly. It was one powerful sentence that felt like a promise, it totally melted her heart.

After sorting things out, they spent a day at the amusement park with Alvin who was elated to see John, he was so fond of him. The boy jumped on him with joy when they met. John and Victor were the only father- figures Alvin had, and not once did he ask for his real father, it was as if he knew that it would affect her mother tremendously.

"He seems to like this place a lot. . ." John snapped after taking few pictures of him riding a toy-car with a bunch of other kids.

"Yeah, I don't know if he'll like the idea of moving to Lycos!" Hanna replied, before resting her arms on the railings surrounding the riding area. They continued watching him from a distance.

"Have you thought of telling him about his father?" Suddenly, John asked. Hanna glared at him with surprised-face, "There's something I never told you Hanna" he said. "It was in Paris when I met Alvin for the first time, right?"

"Yes, it was a week after he turned two. Why are you bringing that up though?" She prompted quickly, her gaze unable to leave his.

"Alvin asked me if I was his father. . ."

"What? My God John, and what did you tell him?"

"The truth Hanna! That I'm not his father" he replied bluntly. "I saw disappointment in his little eyes, then he asked if I knew his father..." with that final detail, Hanna stared at Alvin immediately, a worried expression all over her face, tears almost filled her eyes.

"And how did you answer that?" She sniffed, in attempt to repress her emotions which was a big failure.

"I couldn't! Luckily Victor was there, so he told him that his father was on a secret mission far away, that he'd show up someday after taking care of the bad guys! I think it was some sort of a movie thing they'd watched together or something, because they seemed to understand each other well, he was so happy to hear that!"

"Oh God! Oh my God!" She whispered, she almost lost her balance from shock when John held her. "I'm okay, don't worry!" She braced herself.

"I'm sorry Hanna, I should've told you this. . . I just didn't want to worry you!"

"No John, It's my fault, I only believed what I wanted to believe. That everything was okay, I completely overlooked the fact that he might actually need his father" she cried with regrets.

Later during evening, Hanna was staring intensely at Alvin, while putting his pyjamas on after a warm bath. Everything John

told her continued to disturb her, and yet Alvin was so calm as usual, only excited about the wonderful day they had. He kept talking of it nonstop.

"Alvin, do you want to meet your daddy?" Without realizing, she found herself asking him. Despite the startled look on the boy's eyes, he quickly nodded his head. That simple-yet-intense gesture almost made Hanna cry, but she used all her might to control herself, it was the best thing to do. "Okay baby, I'll tell him to come! Mommy will bring him to you"

"Really? Did he finish the mission? Did he beat the bag guys?" Asked Alvin with much enthusiasm.

Bittersweet smile escaped Hanna's lips as she nodded her head. "Not yet baby. . . but he will, very soon! Oh God!" She embraced him tightly, this time her tears fell down without a warning. "Okay, now let's put the socks on and get some sleep, okay?" She forced a smile.

"Okay! Are you crying mommy?" he queried in a childish tone.

"Me? Oh please Mr. Smart-mouth! Do mommies ever cry?" Hanna flashed a feigned bright smile.

"They do! You cry when I sleep"

"What? So you were spying on me now, huh? You-you-you--" She tickled his belly and both ended up giggling until the whole room was filled with the chuckles and laughter.

A moment later Alvin was already asleep considering how tired he was from all the rides at the park. A phone-call from John

snapped Hanna from her small nap after putting her son to bed. He was on his way to Lycos as they spoke. He wanted to know if she was doing okay, she reassured him then talked a bit before hanging up.

A week later Hanna went back to the restaurant to check the job Claire did. It was impressive that she was left speechless. Turned out Ms. Stevens was great at her job as her reputation spoke for her.

The walls were covered with brown stones in two sides of the restaurant. A gray wooden floor, and several plants along the veneers made from oak tree as a partition to define different areas and seating arrangement like tables for two, four and more; it felt quite organic and soothing.

Coral-blue leather seatings with wooden tables that matched the free-form engraved wood panels on the other sides of the lounge, with some textured glass installed in the slits to create a facade. The ceiling remained the same, except for some new decorations and bulb-pendants to support the long silver-chained chandelier that maintained its vintage ambiance. Claire added some antiques and paintings as a bonus which complimented an authentic touch to the restaurant. The woman had done a spectacular job, in short.

"So? Do you all like it?" Asked Claire with a knowing smile.

"Damn! Like it? I love it Claire... I mean wow!" Hanna snapped

while roaming around the kitchen which was totally transformed with new cabinets and appliances. "Wow! Now I get it why the budget was over-the-top!" She added and they all laughed.

"See, I told you Cherie. . ." Victor urged proudly.

"Well, the bathrooms will be done by the end of today!" Claire said as they approached the area where two men were busy with loud machines.

"It's okay! I guess everything turned perfect, way better than I anticipated!" Hanna confessed.

"My pleasure" said Claire.

They discussed several details, about her final cheque mostly, before leaving her to her job and moved on to their next agenda. They wanted to purchase some other things like plates and glasses hence went to the shopping mall.

"Hey, I thought you'd happy after this so why the long face?" Victor asked after a long boring silence as he rode his maroon-Porsche.

"Well I-- I've made up my mind!" She snapped after a long sigh, but it wasn't enough to unfold the furrow on her cousin's face.

"About what?" He prompted, again the silence prevailed for a minute. "Oh come on! Stop tormenting my curiosity!" he cried.

"I'm going to look for Chris! It's about time he knows about his son!" said Hanna, lost in space as Victor looked at her, bewildered.

"Are you sure? Why so sudden?"

"I have to Victor. . . For Alvin's sake! He still believes that his father is on a secret mission, thanks to his crazy uncle!" She looked pointedly at him and he narrowed his eyes, guiltily.

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna kill you. YET!"

"Oh come on! What was I suppose to do Hanna? It was the only thing I could come up, you know very well how smart your son is!" he said. "But hey, how are you going to find Chris? Will you go to his house?"

"No! I know a way! Internet knows everything, right?" She said vaguely, then sighed softly, as if it was the hardest point she was afraid to reach, but still had to.

* * * *

"WHY didn't you show up for dinner last night?" Abigail snapped at Chris after barging inside his bedroom without a warning. It was seven-thirty in the morning, and he was getting ready for work. Her early barking didn't seem to bother him at all, on the contrary, he just ignored her and entered his walk-in-closet. She followed him with fury. "I'm talking to you Chris!"

"I was busy, did I miss anything special?" He asked her casually, while standing in front of the mirror, putting on a necktie.

"You were busy? I saw one of your cheap sluts leaving when I arrived at the parking lot! And you're telling me you were busy?"

She attacked him, a hand on her slim waist.

Seemed like she hadn't changed much in those four years, except getting thinner. Moreover, she was still bold, beautiful and cunning. As for Christian, he looked smart, serious, like someone in high position, which was in fact the case. He was the General manager of Imperial Hotel which was doing so well upon his management. His name was enough to make news headlines in business sections and even gossiping sites. Still, his relationship with Abbie wasn't study at all.

He sighed frustratedly and replied, "What's the use of attending if you're just going to tell me exactly what you've been telling me in months?" He glared at her, "Abbie, I know your tricks! But like I said before, I'm not interested in marriage. So stop making those arrangements with my mother, it won't help" he stated, then re-faced the mirror, after pulling one of the drawers to get a pair of cufflinks, completely ignoring Abigail's angry reaction.

"WHY? Why are you so against us getting married? We've been dating for almost five years! So then why--" she asked haltingly as if taking an air-break. "Is it because of that stupid Hanna?" She queried, and for a moment Chris froze, one hand stuck on the cufflink of the other sleeve. It felt like Abbie had just hit the bull's eye "Don't tell me you're still hoping that she'd show up! Are you really waiting for that cheap maid? Is that why you don't want us to get married?" She continued.

"You know what? I'm not doing this so early in the morning! I have a meeting in the office, and I'm kind of late!" He finally snapped, face to face.

"Oh yeah? And it's my fault, right?" She continued snapping.

"Marriage is too much of a commitment, and I'm not ready for that. You said it yourself a countless times that I'm a jerk, you just saw Viviana leaving the building. . . do you think you can handle this once we're married?" He smirked, cynically.

"You bastard!" filled with anger, "How dare you--" she raised a hand in attempt to slap him, but he caught it right in time.

"Stop it Abbie, please!" He told her in a soft voice before releasing her wrist. "Instead of all this drama, why don't you tell me the reason why you fired my assistant?" He changed the subject, together with his tone, which sounded too scary. "You fired an innocent person just because she didn't want to become your spy? I know you're such a brat but I was hoping that at least, you're still a professional "

"Yes I fired her! I can do anything I please, its my damn hotel. . . you think I'm a brat? You haven't seen a thing yet! And don't ever forget that you're where you are now, thanks to me!" She paused when realized that Chris was smiling diabolically at her in a most abominable way.

"You think I've come this far because of you? Don't kid yourself! How much can you bet that if I resign my post right now everything will be fine? How much?" He glared at her, she swallowed hard, deep inside she knew that he had a point. In two years of his management, the Imperial hotel moved from three to five stars and had a plan to start a hotel-chain business that was supported by all directors and he'd already made a

merger for a second Imperial hotel and resorts. In spite of his age and scandals, Christian was great as a businessman; he had sharp eyes for greater deals.

"Well I--"

"Stop spouting nonsense, I want you to call Rose, and give her job back"

Abbie was fuming mad, her fists clenched. Without giving him a chance to humiliate her even further, she turned her heels and left his apartment furiously. Once by himself, Chris breathed heavily while gazing at his cold reflection. He'd turned into a different person in those few years that'd passed, he was no longer that same sweet boy who used to argue with Hanna every time they got a chance.

Couple of days later they agreed to have lunch together after a long silence-treatment. Abigail insisted they should forget it and start afresh. It was a huge task getting Chris out of his office but as always she found her way.

"Just as you wanted, I've returned your secretary" She strike a conversation, upon seeing her companion too occupied with his cellphone. "Christian! Are you even listening?" She snapped while abandoning the knife and fork she was delicately using on the piece of tender stake on the plate.

"Oh, you did great! I was thinking of going to her house today!" He replied, relentlessly, before shifting his attention to the untouched food as if he'd just noticed.

Abbie sighed, audibly. "You'd really do that?" She questioned, a stunned look on her painted face.

"Of course! I need her. . .too bad, I even considered giving her a raise" he responded seriously, making Abbie even more upset, which didn't seem to bother him at all.

"I'm really getting tired of this!" She murmured, obviously exhausted with his indifference, he barely heard her comment. She stared at him for a full minute, but decided keeping her cool. "So, how is the plan to buy that hotel in Dar-es-Salaam going along?" She decided to stick to business, it was the only subject of interest as far as Chris was concerned.

"Great! I'll be flying over there in two or three days" he answered, "Speaking of business, why don't you take over as a finance director? You're one of the board members, worked for two years in finance department, good with numbers, I can't see a better candidate for the position!" He said suggestively. Abbie's eyes almost popped out in surprise.

"Me? But what about Mr. Marco? Did he screw up again?"

"Yes! I asked him to resign voluntary if he wants to keep his honour at the very least!"

"Why didn't you just fire him?"

"Abbie, he's one of the founders! It was the least I could do. . .Also, it's the best bargain for our reputation's sake, so let it slide"

"Huh? I really can't stand the way you handle things, you're too

soft at times!" She snapped, irritated.

"At least your mother does!"

"Exactly! You two are so much alike. No wonder you always defend those low class people, can you believe they threatened to go on strike just because I fired few employees? I mean-- they made a mistake, shouldn't they lean to take responsibility? I really don't understand poor people!" She continued while chewing the salads. Chris was only listening, a dark look in his eyes. He always found her snobbish behavior tiresome, one of the many reasons why he couldn't see his future with her. "I don't think I can deal with those people anymore, so I'll think of your proposition! I have to think of my classes too, I didn't know MBA can be such a pain!"

She continued talking until she got interrupted when Chris grabbed his vibrating phone, it was an unknown number, he picked with a frown.

"Yes hello. . . who's this?" He snapped, and his face suddenly changed, he re-checked the number on the screen and placed it back to his ear. "Yes, I am Christian Ashton! Who-- are. . . hello?. . .hello?. . . " he shouted but the person on the phone had already hung up. He slowly put his phone on the table, a somber look on his face as if he'd seen a ghost.

"What's wrong Chris? Who was that?" Abbie asked, worriedly.
"Chris. . ."

"No one! Just a wrong number!" He replied coldly, but she wasn't convinced. "I'm going back to the office! I need to send

some important emails" he snapped and left in a hurry, leaving Abbie clueless.

He slipped inside his SUV and immediately dialed the number that had just called him a minute ago, but it was no longer reachable. He tried again and again, and still nothing. Completely frustrated he threw his phone to the passenger seat, he was panting wildly while loosening his necktie as if to breathe properly. "HANNA! was that really you?" He thought out loudly, staring at his sweaty face through the rear-mirror.

CHAPTER 20

Hanna was quiet. After the failed conversation with Chris in which she herself initiated without realizing that she wasn't actually ready for it. She pressed her lips together, embarrassedly as Victor stared at her expressionlessly. She only shrugged her shoulders and both smiled.

"I couldn't do it!" She said, "I'm such a coward! How could I bail out like a stupid teenage talking to her class-crush for the first time" She muttered, ridiculously.

"Hey Cherie, stop saying that. . ." Victor answered, with a laugh.

"Yeah, just laugh all you want" she pouted. Growing up together made them feel more like friends. Victor was only a year older but always took a big brother role seriously in times of need. He'd always be there for her even when in Paris, the time Hanna was most vulnerable. His easygoing personality usually lightened the house when lived together in Australia, and no one had ever got bored around him.

"So, tell me. . . how did it feel hearing the voice of that playboy?" He asked, seriously this time. Hanna thought for a while before answering;

"Well it was-- Victor! Stop interrogating me like a baby-girl. Let's get back to work, we've got a lot to do!" She sneaked out and went to the pantry.

It was few days before the opening of the restaurant and everyone was restlessly working, trying to make everything

according to the plans. They'd hired three employees already and hoped to hire few more specifically for the opening night. Hanna re-confirmed all the orders they've made as Victor was busy making the menu-list for the event.

The whole thing was so challenging, but suggestively Hanna said that they should have a buffet instead, and everyone seconded the idea right away. It was the best way to save some inconveniences while at the same time researching for the most preferable dishes among the varieties, that way they could come up with the permanent menu for the restaurant.

* * * *

Two days later, Chris went home after a long time. His only reason was to meet Carolyn in person after asking her to do him an important favour over the phone. He waited for hours just to find the information he wanted from her.

"I was told you're here but I couldn't believe it!" Carolyn said to him. "Did something bad happen? Why would you sleep at home?" She asked.

"Would you please stop the drama! Tell me, have you found what I asked you to?" Christian snapped, without even letting her sit down.

She frowned a bit, then pulled a chair next to him. It was almost midnight, and Caro was just coming from the office. She worked as a public defender, the kind of job that made her pull

all-nights every now and then. She was still the same rebel, naturally-beautiful with her extreme short dyed-hair like a rock-star.

Theresa hated Caro's job, to her it was a disgrace, she wanted to at least have her work in a prestigious law firm or company of her status. As always, Carolyn wasn't the type to follow anyone's whim, not even her snobbish mother could change her mind when she decided to take that job despite several other offers from different family acquaintances.

"Yup! I asked a friend from Cyber-police and according him its a telephone line that belongs to Aroma! the call was made from there!" She replied.

"Aroma? What is that?"

"Seriously?" Caro glared at him, "It's a restaurant, we've been there a countless times so don't pretend that I'm talking shits!"

"Oh, that Aroma? but wasn't it closed a while ago?" He recalled.

"I know, but I heard it's being reopened this weekend. . . " She said, still clueless of the situation. She just watched him thinking, as if taking note of what she had told him. "Okay, can someone tell me the reason behind all this fiasco?" She finally snapped at him.

"Well. . ." Chris hesitated.

"Never mind. . .I'm not interested with anything the General Manager has to say, call me when my brother is back!" She got upset, mainly from his introversion.

He'd been so closed for the past four years, and it began to drain all her hopes to get her brother back to the way he was before, that bright and cheerful Chris that they shared secrets and worries. She got up ready to leave when he decided to tell her;

"Hanna called me yesterday!"

"Eh?..." She snapped, startled. "Hanna called you? How? I mean. . ." she wasn't even sure how to react. She just returned to the chair and listened carefully to whatever Chris said. Truthfully, Caro wasn't convinced that it was really Hanna. "Are you sure it wasn't your mind playing tricks on you? I mean. . . why would she call you after all this time? And just to hang up without saying a thing!"

"Do you think I haven't thought of it? I know there's a possibility that I imagined it, but what if I'm right?" He asked Caro, his face showed a deep confusion as his jaw clenched. He sighed while running a hand through his contemporary brunette-hair.

"Well, there's only one way to find out!" She said suggestively, and immediately Chris stared at her. "We're going to the opening event!"

"How?"

"As customers of course! After all I'm craving for some good buffet and I read it will be so!"

"Okay! Let's have dinner there, we'll see if I can find any

connection to the call"

"Deal!" Caro agreed. "But I just have a little question bro, if you don't mind" she suddenly urged. "Why are you doing this? I thought you never wanted to hear from her ever again"

Chris swallowed, the question intrigued him and even he himself wasn't sure about his reaction to that troublesome call. "I don't know why, but lately I've been thinking of her a lot, and after that call. . . I think she and I have an unfinished business!" He snapped in a serious tone of voice, almost scary.

"Okay I get it! How creepy! Somebody might think she'd killed someone" Caro grimaced.

"Anyway thanks for the information Caro, I better leave now!" He stood up, then grabbed his coat.

"What do you mean leaving? Aren't you sleeping over?" She too stood up.

"No, I'd rather not!"

"Please Chris, when was the last time you slept in this room? Aren't you missing it? Can't you stay just for tonight?"

"Okay. . ." he finally succumbed to his sister's charm.

As agreed, in Saturday night, they arrived at Aroma straight from work. It was indeed open and overflowed with customers as it had always been, and without a reservation it wouldn't have

been possible to get a table.

A lady in a formal black suit led them to their respective table away from the lounge and reminded them that it was a buffet night hence they should help themselves.

"Wow, this place looks amazing! Don't you agree?" Caro snapped, looking around admiringly as they started a food puzzle from different variety of multinational cuisine to the huge desert-fountain-like-table.

"I agree, and the food smells nice!" said Chris blatantly.

After resuming their well-decorated table, he started scanning around without a knowledge of what he was actually searching for. Tired of his restlessness, Caro snapped at him;

"Do you really think you can find anything by simply looking around?" She beckoned to one of the waiters. "Watch and learn big boss!" She sneered at him as the lady-waiter approached.

"Any problem ma'am?" She asked politely.

"No at all! Everything is perfect! . . . I only have a little question" Caro prompted. "Is there anyone named Hanna ? Anyone at all. . . an employee maybe? A chef?" She asked, but the lady seemed clueless.

"Well. . . I don't know really! Most of us here were hired for tonight's event so. . ."

"Oh I see!" Caro replied, disappointedly.

"And the owner? Do you happen to know him or her?" Chris

asked after observing silently for a while.

"I'm not sure either! But maybe you should ask the chef, he's the one who hired us. . . " she enlightened them. "Oh, there he is!"

Both heads turned to the opposite side, where Victor in his playful air, was busy talking to some customers. "Well then, have a good evening!" She concluded with a smile before turning her heels as soon as they thanked her.

Just as they hoped, they managed to talk to the main-chef, Victor. Using few compliments regarding the food and restaurant in general as an excuse, they were able to get his full attention until Chris mentioned Hanna. Victor denied completely that he had no idea who that Hanna was, and so was the end of their audience.

"I don't think he's telling the truth" Chris said once Victor left. "What do you think?" He turned to Caro who was already back to her chocolate pastry with strawberry and cream topping.

"As a lawyer, I can tell he's hiding something! He got a bit tense when you mentioned Hanna!" She answered, while licking her fork, thoughtfully. "But as your sister, I think you should just forget this" she added seriously.

"What do you mean?"

"Snap out of it Chris! If she really called you then she must have a reason, and so then, she'll again or show herself up eventually. Let's just wait for her, okay?"

"Are you speaking as a lawyer or my sister?"

"Both! If It was Hanna, I'm sure she'll call you"

"It was her! I'm positive!"

"Well then. . ." she insisted. For once Chris seemed to relax, and even started picking interest on the food instead. "You should try the desert, it's to die for!". He tasted the lemon cake, his favourite flavour and his face quickly changed. "What? You don't like it?" Caro snapped.

"No, it's just. . . it tastes. . .this cake tastes exactly as--" he said haltingly, then had another bite.

"Tastes like what?" She asked impatiently.

"Like Hanna's! Do you remember she used to bake a lot? And I specifically loved her lemon cakes!" His eyes lightened.

"Oh-okay, that's creepy!" Caro uttered while taking a piece herself. "Well. . . it's delicious but to me all cakes are the same! How do you tell it's Hanna's?"

"The flavour, it's unique! I've tried several cakes from different bakeries but never found this one! So I know what I'm talking about"

"Okay. . . this is so very creepy!"

"It's her! It has to be her!" He totally believed.

* * * *

Hanna got a call from Victor, while inside John's car; he'd picked her from the restaurant after work. She was filled in with everything that had happened as soon as she left. Victor made it very clear that it was Christian, based on his pictures from the internet that he searched a moment they finished talking to him. It was quite a surprise to Hanna, wondering how Chris got to reach her so quickly. She went pale as she hung up the phone.

"Everything okay?" John questioned her in a calm voice.

"Huh. . . uh-- yeah! Everything's fine. It was Victor, asking if I'm feeling better, seems like tonight was a success!" She forced a smile and hid the details from him. Even the call was vague that John couldn't catch a thing they were talking.

He just smiled and answered "I'm glad! You've been working tirelessly this week, no wonder you fell sick! But don't worry, Dr. Strange is here!" He teased. With his single joke, it was enough to lighten Hanna's mood, she smiled genuinely.

"Aren't you too full of yourself doctor?" She prompted, in the same teasing air.

"Me? Never! Modesty is my middle name!"

"Oh really now?"

"Of course!" He replied, before ended laughing loudly together. A minute later he turned serious, staring at her. "I really don't like you getting sick, you should take care of yourself Hanna!"

"There we go with your exaggeration, I said I'm fine! I'll be

great after some rest so don't worry sir!" She reassured him.

"That's exactly what you're going to do. . . and I'll see to it myself!"

"Oh yeah? And how exactly?"

"Because I'm kidnapping you tonight! To my place" he said, and Hanna's reaction made him laugh. "What? Weren't you bugging me to find a place to live? You should at least see it!" He told her, but her startled face remained the same. "Wait-- are you thinking something dark right now miss?" He stopped the car, momentarily, a bright smile on his beautiful face.

"What. . . what are talking about?" She snapped, embarrassedly, then looked away to the shining city through the window.

John laughed before clutching the gear, the move continued. "Don't worry ms. Hysteria, I'm a gentleman. . . I won't do anything foul" he said. Their eyes met, under the partial-darkness, and locked for a good while. "Unless you ask me to. . ." he added provocatively. This time, Hanna laughed.

"Fine! Let's do it!" She snapped, as if a sudden confidence overwhelmed her. John raised a surprised eyebrow. "What? Are you afraid what happened inside the train to Baltimore would repeat again? I remember clearly, all the way from New York, Philadelphia to Baltimore- what an eventful night!" She purposely said it, playfully that it made him clear his throat. Hanna seemed to enjoy his reaction even more. "Oh, and in Paris too; on my graduation day! I wonder where that gentleman was in those days? Was he on a vacation perhaps? Or maybe--"

"Fine! Fine! You've won Hanna, huh? Can you stop reminding me that?" He quickly asked her.

"Oh really? But why? I thought we were having fun!" She made an innocent face. "Are you getting uncomfortable at the thought? Are you perhaps--" she couldn't finish her query, as John suddenly hit the brakes and invaded her smart-mouth with a long intense-kiss. The memories of their most intimate moments seemed to make him lose his mind.

"If you continue talking about that I won't be able to contain myself! Doesn't matter we're in the middle of the road" He whispered in a hoarse voice, both out of breath, inside the dark car with only faint light from the blinkers and interior gadgets.

"Okay. . ." she answered softly.

"Good! Behave now!"

They arrived at his apartment, which was simple and cozy about half an hour later. She made a nice comment of it as they stepped in. John made her some tea and insistingly told her to finish it all before taking some pills for her rising-fever. The whole time Hanna was observing him silently, as he took a great deal of attention over a simple rise of her body temperature.

"You do know that I'm not sick right?" She finally told him, "I'm just tired John, you don't need to treat me like a patient"

"A mere tired human doesn't have a 39°C" he replied in a normal tone of voice, "What kind of a doctor am I if I can't even take care of my sick girlfriend"

"Okay my doctor. . . I've taken the pills and plenty of water! Can we go to sleep now? I feel drowsy!" Hanna asked with a smile and he smiled back, resignedly.

"As you wish!" He held her hand and led her to his bedroom. Everything in his place looked brand-new, as if nobody lived there. Moreover, it was clean and neat; exactly as John was.

Perhaps it was the pills' effect, Hanna fell asleep right away in his arms.

The following day at the restaurant, she confirmed about the opening event which was a great success. The number of customers on that day was more that they'd projected, hence they had another busy day until around three in the afternoon when they took a break.

"We really need to hire the assistant chefs, I swear I'm going to collapse in no time!" Hanna snapped after gulping a glass of cold water. She dropped on the chair heavily. "And just a reminder. . . I'm a dessert chef, so stop making me do other stuffs Victor!" She lamented like a child and made the whole staff laugh.

"Okay Cherie, stop complaining already! Actually I've already made contact with the previous ones as you suggested, let's hope they're still unemployed" Victor replied before dismissing the others for lunch at the other side of the kitchen. "What are you going to do now?" He asked Hanna as they were having lunch themselves.

She understood his question right away even without going

into details. She bit her lips slightly, then exhaled audibly. "I'm going to call him once again, right now!" She answered.

"Right now? are you sure cousin?"

"I am. . . It's now or never!" She snapped with a determined look.

A minute later, she searched for Christian's number and dialed it but it wasn't available. She attempted for a second time, then another one and another one.

"What's wrong?" Victor asked, he was beside her the whole moment.

"It's not available! Should I try his office line? I think I saved it" she remarked, and in a short while she made another call. She got directed straight to Christian's office when his secretary answered and announced that he was in a meeting. Hanna wanted to give up there, but Victor grabbed the phone and asked the secretary to pass the message to Chris, that someone named Hanna called, and she'd wait for him at Aroma. "Damn it Victor, why did you do that?"

"Because if I didn't, you would never have the guts to. . . It's better to get it over with Cherie, thank me later!" He blew his cousin a kiss before walking away, leaving her perplexed.

Hanna wasn't sure if she was ready to face Chris or not. At that moment all her fears and anxieties came back to life, but one thing was crystal clear, she needed to do it. Alvin had all the right to know his father and Chris his son, even though there

was something troubling her as marvelling the thought. How was he going to react? Would he like the news? Or get mad instead. How was Hanna herself going to feel, upon meeting the man she used to love with all her heart, Could she handle it?. Those were few questions that kept burning and churning inside her.

At six-forty pm, she was already done with her work in the kitchen. Hence took a quick shower and changed to her normal clothes. Her agreement with Victor was that she'd only work until six because of her motherly responsibilities. In a first place, Hanna never wanted to work in a restaurant but victor insisted for her help for at least three months until he found a better dessert chef. What she really wanted was to open up a bakery and do what she was good at.

Since Alvin was still at Greenhill, she wanted to have a quiet evening alone at the hotel. The idea of seeing Chris on that day was already gone since they couldn't hear a word from him nor his secretary. She brushed her golden-hair then sprinkled few drops of her French perfume before leaving the changing room.

"If that playboy sees you right now he'd lose his jaw! You look marvelous Cherie. . . and that perfume mh. . . enchanting!" Exaggeratedly, Victor snapped in his fake French-accent a second he saw her.

Hanna sighed, exhaustedly. "Yeah, too bad for him huh? That Playboy!" She muttered. Her mind quickly drifted to all the online articles about Chris and his conquests, plenty of scandals

with celebrities and models. She already had a handful even without meeting him in person, he seemed like a different Chris from the one she knew. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow! Don't wait up at home. . . I'm checking in the hotel" she told him. While in Lycos, they both lived in one of their family houses where their grandfather willingly offered.

On her way out, she received an unexpected visit. It was Christian Ashton at the restaurant door, walking in nonchalantly beside her, differently in directions as he was heading in and she out. Hanna stopped her heels the moment she saw him, she recognized him right away despite his fancy tailored-suit that changed his appearance immensely. Without thinking she called out his name;

"Christian!" Her voice was calm, she slowly turned around and so did he, astounded look on his clean-shaved face. It seemed like he'd discerned her voice. He stood there wordlessly for a long while, just staring at Hanna like a ghost. "I-- hi? . . ." she uttered. He was still frozen for almost a minute.

"Hi. . . Hanna!" He unfroze eventually, then swallowed hard, followed by nothing but awkwardness and bewilderment on his tragic look.

Minutes passed by, once seated at the couple table each at either of the sides. Christian's face was filled with anger and contempt while Hanna's was as calm as the morning dew. He was rigidly leaning against the leathered-seat, glaring gravely at her.

"I-- I didn't think you'd come!" At last Hanna broke the nerve-wrecking silence that was beginning to feel like a funeral home. Chris was still quiet, as if considering whether to respond or not. Decidedly, he opted for the former;

"I had to. . ." he took a little sip of water from the glass on the table. "You've changed a lot by the way. . . you look-- Well, it doesn't matter" he halted, regretfully. "You know-- I'm very shocked that I don't even know where to start! I'm extremely angry!" He said, with gritted teeth.

"You're angry? Why?" Hanna asked innocently, her stoic manners were still intact despite the uneasiness she was feeling inside. Annoyed by her attitude, Chris smirked cynically while brushing his thumb on his lower lips and said;

"Why am I angry? You're seriously asking me this? Are you for real?" His voice reflected pain as he questioned her. Hanna swallowed with difficulty, and momentarily looked away as if to regain her lost composure. He sighed and said, "Anyways, You always do what you want and then disappear. . . so then, what brings you back now? Why did you call me here?"

His last remark made Hanna stunned, for a second she wanted to scream to his face that he was the traitor and not the other way around, but decided to forego. She took a deep breath, a simple gesture to gather all the courage, before fixing her posture.

"I have something important to tell you, that's why I called!" She prompted, and he just narrowed his volcanic-eyes, as his

sharp jaw contracted. This time he sat cross-legged with his arms folded against his chest. Even in such state, he kept emanating his bossy-aura.

Hanna continued, "I have a son!"

Chris frowned. "You have a son!" He merely repeated what she'd just say, in a mocking way as he laughed diabolically for a short while. There was a silhouette of anger rising on Hanna's eyes as she watched him. "And so? Do you want me to congratulate you or something?. . . Fine, congratulations! What else, or I know. . . you're married too, right? Are you married?" He snapped like a jerk.

Over-frustrated, Hanna gulped a whole glass of water at once, then sighed heavily before answering, "No, unfortunately not!"

"Oh! I see. . . So then--"

"He's turning four in three months!" She snapped, loudly. She was no longer able to keep her cool.

"Okay! Good for you!" Chris remarked, in the same tone. "But I still don't understand what's that got to do with me. . . It's not like I'm the father of your--" he stuck middle-way as if he'd just seen the picture, astonished. "Did you just say four years?" he asked, looking at her in the most confused way. "Does this mean --"

"Exactly! You have a son! Our son!" She plainly laid it down.

He sharply stood up as if it was the most shocking news he'd ever heard in his entire existence. His flaming eyes dug into

Hanna's with unflinching gaze. "You're kidding, right?" He said, the huskiness in his voice made Hanna dig a hand through her hair as if to borrow some patience. He leaned over to her face, with the support of his hands in the table. "You're trying to mess up with me, aren't you? But why. . . why are you doing this? What do you want from me Hanna?" He demanded.

"Nothing!" She exclaimed straight to his face, with unblinking eyes. "I want absolute nothing from you!. . . the only reason I'm here is Alvin! I want my son to know his father, I don't give a damn of what you think or feel for me!" She also raised her voice and for once there was a blissful hint on Christian's face.

"Alvin? Is that your son's name?" he queried. Given Hanna's silence, he took it as a yes and slowly returned to his seat. He loosened his necktie instinctively before exhaling deeply. He took a silent oath for a minute and ended up stifling a laugh as if whatever he'd heard by far was a total absurdity. "You're really something else Hanna? Who are you?"

"I don't understand!" She said.

"I mean. . . you planned it very perfectly! What were you expecting? That I'd be ecstatic? You think I'm that stupid?"

"WHAT?"

"First, you leave without a word. . . not even goodbye! And then you come back with THIS?" He spoke in a scornful manner. "So, you want to say that you got pregnant from that one night we shared? The damn night that I've forgotten long ago? You expect me to believe that?" He added. Unable to take it furthermore,

Hanna got up immediately and grabbed her purse. She didn't even bother to look him in the eyes as she pushed the chair massively ready to turn her heels. "Yeah, run away! It's what you're good at anyway!" He snapped lazily before gulping the rest of the water in his glass, wishing it was double Scotch.

Hanna turned her head sharply and said, "I'm not running away! I just can't stand listening to your ironies over and over again. . . You're so cynic!"

"Or really?" He got on his toes. "And what do you expect me to say? Tell me! Do you want me to--" his voice was high, and their conversation had started to attract an audience but neither of the two cared at the moment.

"Just-don't-say-anything!" Hanna shouted angrily. "Just-shut-the-fuck-up!" She added. The scary tone of her voice startled almost everyone, including Chris who started to lower his guards. "You--have no right to make such a dreadful comment, you hear? I shouldn't have called you, it's my mistake! You don't have any right to be Alvin's father. . . so forget it and continue living your pathetic life as you've been doing so far. He'll be fine without you, I'll make sure of that!" This time she spoke with utmost calmness, tears drenched her lashes as she wiped out with the tip of her fingers. They both fell silent while glaring at each other malignantly until;

"Is everything okay Hanna?" Victor's cool voice broke the bad spell as she slowly looked at him. She let out a deep breath. None of them knew how or when he'd arrived there, but it was obvious that their argument might've been the reason.

"It's okay Victor! I was just leaving. . . and I think this gentleman will be gone too in a while" she said pointedly at Chris whose destabilized look was impassive. As she took a step towards the exit, another problem arose, a very familiar figure was wandering around as if searching for someone. "Just great! that's all I needed to complete the mess!" She uttered absently and before the two men could catch on, it was already too late.

"Why are you ignoring my calls Chris?" Abigail stormed in like a hurricane. Based on Christian's troubled look, he didn't seem elated to see her either. "And who are these--" she threw a glance at Victor then Hanna and immediately turned pale. "What --what is this?"

"Abbie, what are you doing here? How did you find me here?" Chris urged, but not even his intimidating voice could stop her from glaring at Hanna as if she'd seen a scary ghost from the past.

"You, what are you doing here? What's going on here?" Abbie was trembling with fury as she asked those two questions in a row.

"Okay everyone. . . I think you should all go out, this is a restaurant and you're beginning to annoy the customers so--" Victor intervened but without even finishing his words, Hanna walked away, completely ignoring Abbie's reaction as if she was an insignificant thing she had no interest at.

With everything that'd happened in one evening, the last thing she wanted was a tantrum from a jealous and insecure girlfriend.

CHAPTER 21

The meeting with Chris turned out to be another heartache for Hanna. Even though it wasn't to the point of dismay, still couldn't help feeling dejected after his mortifying attitude towards her. She wrapped her arms around her body as a chilly-breeze reminded her of a late-spring as she walked quickly to the bus stop.

For a moment she didn't want to see or talk to anyone, her heart and mind was ablaze and each word Chris said kept echoing into her ears. He was no longer the man she used to know, he sounded possessed, angry and wounded; which Hanna couldn't understand why. *I should be the angry one, not him*, she thought.

She found refuge at the isolated bus stop, unsure whether it was active or not since she was the only person there. In few seconds, her cellphone rang and it was Victor on the line. She picked up reluctantly.

"What?" She uttered.

"Nothing, just checking on you. . . are you okay?" He asked calmly, he was so aware of Hanna's temper when someone got on her nerves.

"I'm fine, it was nothing I can't handle!" She responded after a long sigh. "Are they gone?"

"Yeah, thank Goodness! That chick wanted to follow you but the Playboy stopped her" he told her, but she remained silent.

"So, where are you heading now?"

"I'm not sure. . . even hell would be fine right now" She answered in a normal tone of voice. Victor laughed, she too found herself doing the same. "I'm sorry for the commotion, I hope it didn't ruin your restaurant's reputation!" She joked.

They talked a little more before hanging up. She spent the next five minutes scrolling her son's pictures on the phone, a hopeful smirk on her tired-face as a sudden urge to at least hear his sweet voice submerged her. She gave in, and decided to call her mother so as to reach Alvin.

The boy was happy talking to Hanna, and it was a long conversation; a bus stopped and left, she remained right there, smiling as she ended the call. At last her soul was soothed and for a while she'd forgotten the great ordeal she'd just went through some minutes ago. She'd always find solace through her son, whenever things went wrong. While taking advantage of the free air, she received another call from John; she picked immediately.

"Hi doctor strange. . ." she said, enthusiastically.

"Hi. . .you sound happy! Did you miss me that much?" He replied with his usual mischief.

"Did I?. . . I don't think so? How about you?" She decided to mess with him.

"Oh-oh! I feel wounded!" He growled exaggeratedly. " Can't you at least pretend missing me"

"Should I? . . . Well, I was thinking of retracting my prior statement and tell the truth, that I really really miss you. . . I mean for real! But I guess I should just continue pretending that I don't!" "Is that so? Well then forget it, just stick to the truth! It's always good to tell the truth" he said and Hanna laughed heartily. "Still at work?" He resumed his seriousness.

"At the bus stop. . . you? Are you at the hospital?"

"On my way home!"

"Can I sleep over? I think I sleep well over there compared to--"

"Hanna, you don't need to ask! It's also your home. Wait for me. . . I'll pick you up" he snapped, the remark made her smile.

"It's okay John, the bus is here. . ." she insisted as another bus approached.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, see you shortly!" She urged and slipped inside the bus.

In less than an hour, Hanna was already at John's apartment; her shoes and purse were dropped randomly at the living room and she was comfortably sitting at the kitchen counter-top, wriggling her feet while watching her boyfriend preparing her dinner.

He turned to her, "You seriously want to eat cup noodles?" It was the third confirmation, She nodded. "You and your simplicity!" He murmured. He poured some hot water into each serving and waited for five minutes during which he paced

towards Hanna and wrapped her waist with his both hands, staring at one another. "You were planning to skip dinner, weren't you?" he asked, softly but annoyed. He never liked that tendency of hers, of skipping meals just because she spent a lot of time in the kitchen. "Don't give me that puppy look, I'm very mad!" He added.

"I'm sorry, I was just craving something plain!" She answered.

They ate the noodles with some orange juice before retiring to the bedroom. Hanna took another quick shower, followed by John who took a little longer. While waiting for him, she just slipped under the duvet in a bathing-robe. For quite a moment her mind drifted to that evening's incident. She felt so hurt and disturbed but John's return, few minutes later managed to resume her joy. He was super clean; he'd just shaved, from the look of it. He joined her on bed and started inspecting her face.

"Did something happen while I was gone? You look gloomy!"

Hanna was surprised. "No, I think you're imagining things. . ." she answered. She was feeling bad deep inside, for not telling him about Christian. Momentarily, she wanted to confide, but it was pretty hard to start the issue. *I'll tell him tomorrow*, she decided.

"Hey pretty. . . I'm talking to you! What are you scheming now?" John snapped at her. To her surprise, he was staring her in the eyes as if reading them while resting his head on his left elbow. His eyebrows arched.

"Uh-- well. . . I'm thinking of doing this. . ." she pecked him on

the cheek. He frowned, in a cheesy way. Hanna laughed at his face.

"And this. . ." again she kissed his forehead then paused to see his reaction.

"Only that?" He asked, as if disappointed. It made her giggle.

"And this. . . and this one--" she attempted to kiss his other cheek when he deliberately caught her lips. He gave her a real passionate kiss, that left her breathless. "I was heading there. . . you've ruined my plans!" Hanna snapped sulkily and made him laugh audibly. She glared at him narrow-eyed.

"Okay fine! Pretend I didn't do it. . . here, go on!" He placed his face closer, something that made them both laugh. They continued teasing, giggling, pillow-fighting and kissing like little teens in love. Unable to contain themselves anymore, they ended up making love; a romantic one without lust.

Even the following day broke, still Hanna couldn't tell John about Chris. He dropped her at home to change clothes, then off at Aroma before heading to the hospital. It was pretty early, hence she decided to do the cleaning then arranged the flowers; which she was so good at and decidedly used it a therapy. Her studying in Paris had changed her vastly. She adapted almost every charming female etiquette without imposing on superciliousness; she was still a simple and loving girl despite her improved economic status since accepted by her father's grand family. The day went uneventfully, except for many customers who kept bustling at the restaurant. She pulled

overtime to help Victor and returned home together that night.

* * * *

Chris was still adjusting to the shock of his life. Good thing Abbie was in the middle of exams, which spared him a great deal of problems regarding Hanna's appearance. They never talked since that time Chris reprimanded her for stalking, while refusing to give her any explanation regarding the incident. He only reassured Abbie that it was their first meeting in years; which she never bought.

His apartment door swung open and Carolyn stormed in. "Okay, now tell me from the beginning. . . I was working, so I didn't have time to listen" she snapped after throwing her briefcase and jacket on the couch. She looked exhausted. "You're alone right? I don't want any unpleasant surprise from your conquest" she added wryly. Chris responded with a smirk, he was drinking himself out after failing to concentrate on work the whole day; he had left the office early with all his appointment cancelled.

"Just sit down. . . stop whining!" He retorted.

"Ah-- look at you! You're a mess!" She shook her head to the sides. She went to the kitchen and grabbed two cans of Heineken. "So, you did meet her?"

"Yeah. . . I finally saw my Hanna!"

"Your Hanna? You're sick!" Said Caro with a feigned distaste,

while sitting on a rug. Chris was on the end side of his sectional-couch, lying down lazily. "And? What else. . . I mean, has she changed? Same? Tell me everything!" She urged, with excitement.

Chris was dumbfounded, "Is that even important Caro?"

"Of course, I'm always a big fan of her. . . she's an interesting being"

"She has changed! She's a woman now. . . a very beautiful woman! I couldn't even recognise her."

"Wow! Now I'd really like to see that! And what did you talk about?" She asked, and to her surprise Chris was silent, an ambiguous silent. "Hey, spill it already. . . what's the mystery? You didn't start a fight with her by any chance, did you?" She nagged him while swallowing a cold Heineken slowly.

"Even worse. . ." he muttered. Caro frowned. Finally Chris put his feet off the sofa, and got himself seated with both elbows on either knees, then took a very deep breath. "She told me that we have a son!" Said he, plainly, then reached for a can on the tables and clutched the lid in a single move, ignoring Carolyn's astonished look with her mouth agape; she'd almost choked.

Suddenly she started laughing. "Wait-- what do you mean you have a son? Like a real son? together. . . you and Hanna? A baby?" She asked and he nodded in agreement. "Wow, I mean. . . wow! Am I an aunt then? I have a nephew!" she continued expressing her shock. The news seemed to have surpassed all her expectations, and when Chris told her the rest of the story; his reaction to the news, how rudely he behaved with Hanna

and the scene they created when Abbie arrived. Caro was even more appalled, especially from Christian's words to Hanna implying that he didn't trust her enough to believe he was Alvin's father. "Oh Jesus Chris! I wonder how your smart-mind works sometimes; how can you tell that to a woman? Do you even know what that means?"

"No, Is it that bad?"

"Yes, it's the same as accusing her of being a whore or slut; because only those women are incapable of knowing who the child's father is!"

Chris got up abruptly, run a hand in his hair and grimaced. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened. He took several minutes to ruminate before turning back to Caro. "I was shocked! I-- I didn't even realize the magnitude of the situation. . . I think I've messed up again!" He said regrettably, in a low tone of voice. "I guess I used my anger against her, and failed to see the real issue!"

"You're still mad at her for leaving you back then, aren't you?" Caro asked. The living room was filled with silence; a dropping needle could make a sound. After a long moment Caro said hesitantly, "Chris, Hanna saw you embracing Abbie that night. . . she thinks you betrayed her! That's why she left without a word!" Eventually the truth came to light.

"WHAT?"

"Yeah, you can hate me if you want but I--"

"No-- please repeat what you've just said! Hanna did what?"

It was another surprise for Chris. All those years he'd been resenting Hanna, thinking she'd betrayed him after the best night they shared, and for what, just to realize that it was a stupid misunderstanding. He felt so stupid and angry at the same time, and mostly mad at Caro for keeping such important piece of information. But to her defense, she reminded him of a day she hinted him of such possibility and he stiffly replied "It doesn't matter. . . if she loved me as she claimed, she'd have tried to sort out any kind of misunderstanding". And with that, Chris lost.

The following day, Christian was determined to meet Hanna again after attending his morning schedules. He wanted to make things right, or making her realize that everything was a huge misunderstanding at the very least. Without pondering further, he gave Hanna a call and she reluctantly accepted his audience. Once again, they agreed to meet at Aroma.

He pinched the phone and told Rose, his secretary. "Shift the rest of my appointments for tomorrow!"

"All of them sir?" Rose replied.

"All of them. . . except my lunch meeting with Starlight Constructions. I'll personally meet Mr. Cornwall tonight."

"Noted sir!"

When done, he got to his feet ready to leave when Theresa

suddenly popped in at the speed of a light, followed by Rose who had a terrified look. "It's okay Rose, you can go back to work!" Chris urged.

"What is this I'm hearing?. . . is it true that girl is back? Are you seeing her again?" She barked. She was as radiant as ever, dresses up like a royal. In an instant, Chris realized that it was about Hanna, he sighed resignedly.

"Mom, I'm extremely busy! Can we talk about that some other time? I'm running late. . ." he said, calmly.

"When?. . . when are we going to talk about this?"

"Later! I'll be back home tonight. . . who knows? Maybe I'll give you a bigger shock than this". His conversation with Theresa was short, as he immediately left for his grand appointment.

IN LESS than an hour, Chris was already at Aroma and for once they exchanged greetings in a descent manner.

"I'm listening. . ." Hanna said calmly.

"Well, I'd like to apologize first-- for the way I reacted the last time we talked" Chris told her in the same tone.

"It's okay! I wasn't expecting you to be full of ecstasy" she replied dryly. "So, what is it that you want now?"

"I want to meet him. . . Alvin! Is it possible?"

Hanna glared at him for a long while, as if reading his sudden

change of attitude which caught her off-guard. Truthfully, she wasn't expecting Chris sometime soon, she had projected it would've taken longer than that.

"I'm bringing him here this Sunday, maybe you two can meet afterwards; I still need to tell him about this." She answered and there was a slim smile on Christian's face.

He wanted to inquire more about the boy, but decided to keep calm until they met. He wasn't even sure of his true feeling concerning the matter, but still wanted to do things right this time. They stayed silent, watching each other awkwardly across either side of the table. If it were four years ago, they'd have a lot to talk of; important and even the most meaningless things, just to keep the conversation going. And probably they'd be laughing until they break a rib, but at that moment, they were like two strangers on a blind date or something.

"You. . . look beautiful by the way. I mean you've changed a lot!" He uttered from nowhere.

"Um. . . thanks!" Hanna replied shyly. She got flustered by his sudden remark and for once she came to recognition that she was actually talking to the man she once loved crazily. "I-- I need to get back to work Chris if you. . ."

"Wait!" He exclaimed, almost startingly. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead!"

"Why now?" Chris snapped. "You could have told me earlier

that you got pregnant! Why did you wait this long?"

Took you long enough to ask Christian Ashton, Hanna thought. For a moment she recalled the day she went back to the mansion with the intention of telling him about her pregnancy, and to her horror, Chris appeared with his girlfriend. She swallowed hard, before looking up at him and met his inquiring gaze.

"If I did come back and told you so, do you think your reaction would've been different from now?" She asked, her piercing eyes digging his.

Chris frowned a bit, thoughtfully, then clenched his sharp jaw. "I don't know Hanna, but even so. . . I don't--"

"What about your girlfriend? your family? How would they take it?"

"I know, it's just--"

"I wanted to protect myself! And mostly my baby!" Hanna said with utmost sincerity. Chris seemed lost for a second. "I was just a simple inexperienced girl back then. . . I was scared! Scared of everything. But you know what? Not even once did I have a second thought about keeping my baby! I wanted to have it with all my might and the last thing I wanted was for my son to experience REJECTION! Yes Chris, I was afraid you, and your family. . . I was scared that you'd all reject him. I know that feeling by heart, And I--" she stopped, to restrain herself from tearing, then took a deep breath. "My point is, I don't need anything from you Chris, I can take care of Alvin as I've been

doing so far. . . it's just, he needs his father! He never mentions it but I know he does. But if you still have doubts, we can stop this here and now. . . I'll just tell him you're dead or something and--"

"Hanna please!" Chris snapped at last. "There is no need to go to such extreme! I believe you, and I want to meet him. . . my son!"

That night Chris went to his parent's house as promised.

"What? You have a son with HER?" It was Theresa's smacking voice echoing the walls of the grand living room at the Ashton's residency. "No, it can't be! She's lying son. . . she's only trying to trap you once again and--"

"Mom. . . mom please! enough of this talk! She told me so, and I believe her! In fact, I'm going to meet him soon!" Chris replied, determinedly.

"No, no! This is not happening!" Theresa got to her feet, and started pacing around as if looking for another way. She immediately turned towards her husband, who happened to be present that night, and was silently contemplating the news, his expression unreadable as usual. "James, say something for God's sake! Your son is getting crazier by day, he's going insane!" She cried.

"Make sure to bring him home soon. . . if you're sure he's my

grandson!" James said bluntly. He was still a man of few words.

"JAMES!" Theresa exclaimed angrily. "You can't possibly accept this--"

"Christian is no longer a child Theresa! Let him solve his own problems now. . ." he snapped, short and clearly, before getting up.

Chris followed after him and said. "Thanks dad! That means a lot!"

James looked at him, and patted his back slightly without saying a word. I hope those two turn you into a man now, he only thought so inwardly as he turned his toes towards the staircase. Chris stared after him, proudly. For the past few years they've been trying to sort out their differences and at last it seemed to have worked for good.

"No, all men in this house are insane! You and your father are completely insane! I know whom I should talk to!" Theresa continued barking while reaching for her cellphone.

"Mom, if you're trying to call Abbie please stop! I'll be the one to tell her. . ." Chris demanded.

* * * *

On Sunday morning, Hanna went to Greenhill with Victor; They both agreed to close the restaurant for a day so as to give the employees some time to recharge after a busy week they all had.

"Can you help me pack some of Alvin's clothes, Gwen?" Hanna asked for a favor later after lunch.

"Sure thing Hanna!. . . wanna come Alvin?" replied Gwen before waiting for the child's reaction. He was sulking; he didn't want to leave Greenhill without Gwen as they grew closer in that short time.

"What's the matter baby? Don't you want to go with mommy to Lycos? I have a surprise for you, remember!" Hanna sweet-talked him.

"I want Gwen to come with us. . ." Alvin replied in a cheesy way.

Hanna had no choice but to ask Maria if Gwen could accompany them and she saw no problem about it.

"It's okay with me, it's not like she has anything important to do here!" Maria said and it was quite decided.

Before leaving when the sun had finally set, Sarah had a little talk with Hanna.

"You're doing the right thing honey! I hope everything goes well" she told her before entering Victor's Porsche on the wait.

"Me too mom, I can't wait for this to finally be over!" Hanna said.

"Speaking of which, how is Chris? Has he changed? How is--"

"He seemed okay mom! Pretty much okay! He's a successful man now. . . and very handsome as he's been!"

"Oh I see!" Sarah retorted happily. "And-- how did you feel? I mean--"

"There's no way I'm discussing that with you ms. Sarah!"

"But why. . ."

"Mom. . .It's getting dark and we're running late!" She snapped, disapprovingly. "And just so you know. . . I love John! Bye!" With a kiss on the cheek, Hanna slipped at the front passenger seat.

"Goodbye aunt Sarah!" with a laugh, Victor poked through the window.

"Drive safely son!" Sarah replied, and he drove away some minutes later.

When Hanna called Chris about her arrival back in Lycos, he nearly drove to her house that very same night. Suggestively, she told him to wait for the next day at least.

Hanna got up early on Monday, intending to prepare Alvin's favourite breakfast; burrito bites with chocolate banana smoothie or some honey-cheese pancakes. She decided to make both, and added some scrambled eggs, salads, bacon and French toast. She wanted everyone to have a feast, before leaving for work.

While winding up her task in the kitchen, there was a sharp ring at the door.

Who could it be at this time, she thought.

"Mrs. Phillips, can you please check who's at the door?" She screamed at the bulky middle-aged woman they hired to keep the house; she's been very efficient by far.

When Mrs. Phillips returned, few minutes later, she said "There's a gentleman looking for you Ms. Hanna" she stepped aside, at the kitchen doorway and revealed the young man dressed up in an elegant body-fit suit.

"Chris! What are you doing here at this hour?" Hanna exclaimed, unable to conceal the surprise in her fresh-morning eyes.

Chris lunged towards her, with perplexed expression as if he was out of his sane-mind. He said, "Hanna I'm sorry. . . I tried, but. . . I couldn't take another minute. . . I-- I hardly slept last night and--"

"Can you finish up with the coffee Mrs. Phillips?" Hanna interrupted. The woman nodded with a warm smile, as she dried up her hands before stepping out of the kitchen. followed by Chris down the hallway. "He's still sleeping though, is it okay?" She paused at her bedroom-door and asked.

"Fine! I just want to see him"

"Very well. . ."

Hanna led Chris in, he slowly entered her spacious bedroom and rested his soft gaze on the little boy wrapped under the blanket. His eyes lightened with joy as he approached the bed,

and turned them only once to check on Hanna's reaction at the door where she was still-standing. A nervous breath escaped her lungs as she watched him seating next to his son while staring at him like a sweet little-stranger.

"He. . . he is big!" Chris uttered incredulously. A grin on his lips enticed how excited he was and right then, Hanna joined him.

"In two months he'll turn four!" She snorted.

"He has my hair!" He continued with his inspection while trailing his fingers on Alvin's head, he shuddered slightly.

"Yeah, unfortunately!" She rolled her eyes.

"What?"

"Nothing! I think blondes are hot. . ."

He laughed. "Blondes are hot?"

"Yes, don't you agree?!"

With that little bickering, they found themselves laughing for once in years. For a second, it felt like they went back in time. But the joy was only short-lived as the magic vanished the minute they shared a long gaze.

"I think he's waking up. . ." Chris said, and Hanna moved closer to see Alvin yawning while stretching subconsciously.

"Hey baby! Wake-wake?" She uttered with a crazy intonation. A minute later, he was fully-awake. He stared at both Hanna and the stranger, cutely as he scratched his little head in confusion.

"Who-are-you?" He uttered in a low voice, pointedly at Chris.

"Me? . . . um. . . well--" Chris stuttered, he didn't know how to respond right away until he looked at Hanna who signaled him to go on.

"Are-you-my-daddy?" Alvin snapped, out of the blue. He left everyone surprised by his quick wit. How he managed to nail it, was the question inside Hanna's head as much as it was for Chris. "Is-he mommy?"

"Well baby--"

"Yes Alvin. . . I am your daddy!" Chris said confidently.

"Yay! You're back!" The boy threw himself on his father's arms, he was very happy and sounded like he'd known him forever. Chris seemed confounded at first, but melted in his little warm embrace, and he knew right away that he was really his son.

That morning turned a new chapter into Christian's life; he was glad to meet Alvin, he enjoyed it even. Talking to him, answering some of his hardest questions that caught him off-guard most of the times, gave him a new insight about the joy of being a father. He didn't need a DNA test to prove the paternity, the chemistry itself was enough to make him believe. Before leaving, he promised to visit Alvin again later that day.

"Have you seen it Hanna? He likes me. . . my son likes me!" Chris kept screaming as she led him at the house exit. He was elated with a ridiculous smile on his face, and the sight was so

appealing to Hanna.

"Are you that happy?" She queried, curiously.

"Very happy. . . so happy that I want to scream to the entire world that I have a son!"

"Don't you want to take a paternity test? What if he is not your son?" Hanna spoiled it, she seriously wanted to see how deep was his faith towards her. He immediately tensed up, swallowed hard and answered;

"I'm not going to take any test! You said he is my son and I believe you! Or should I doubt you?" He plunged his pissed-look on her. She neither moved nor answered his question, instead she stared at him intensely. "I'm going to the office. . . but I'll drop by later!" He snapped and reached for the massive door.

"Wait!" Hanna urged. He returned instantly, with his pissed-face still. She closed the distance, and took ahold of his crooked necktie. From all the fuss he made with Alvin a while ago, his tie was out of shape. Hanna started fixing it and Chris remained still, feeling her hands making contact with his chest. He held his breath instinctively as if her touch was some sort of electrifying object and he felt metallic. Watching her face closer, her sharp brows, alluring lips, made him destabilized.

Slowly, Hanna lifted her face and met his. There was a sparkle, that would've soon turned into a firework; She drooped her hands and moved a little farther back.

"It's done! You can go!" She uttered softly.

"Oh. . . thanks!" Chris answered and left right away.

Once inside his car, he grabbed a deep relief sigh. He stared at his just-fixed tie and smiled stupidly, threw one more glance at the house before stepping the clutch.

* * * *

The day at the restaurant was filled with joy, it was impossible to wipe off the smile on Hanna's face. Being able to fulfill her son's wish was the biggest accomplishment of her life. Now I don't have anything to worry about, she thought. But regretted right away, when Victor emerged from the lounge.

"Hey Cherie, John called. . . he said he can't reach you" he said.

"My phone! I think I left it insider the locker. I'll call him soon!" She answered.

"And I hope you'll tell him everything while at it. . .you can't keep him in the dark forever Hanna, the sooner the better!"

Hanna knew what Victor meant, especially after he witnessed the scene at the door earlier in the morning. And he was right, John deserved to know what had been going on. *But how will he react*, she wondered.

CHAPTER 22

"I really wanted to let it slide when I saw you that day. . . but you always find a way to irritate me! What is it that you're pulling now?" said Abbie. After learning about the child's existence from Christian, she got furious. She'd stormed inside the restaurant like an injured buffalo, and poured Hanna with insults. "And you actually think you're schemes are going to work? Get real honey. . . that's an old trick! Maybe Chris can buy it but definitely not me!" She added.

"Are you done ?" Hanna, who was quiet the whole time asked.

"No, I'm not done yet!" Abbie snorted. "I'm not sure what you want from all this, but I can assure you that it'll never work! Never! Chris is mine. . . mine! You hear me?" She leaned towards Hanna, savagely. "How much? How much money do you want to stop making up stories, huh?"

Hanna was silent. She just took in all the venom without making a face; If a poker-face was a lesson, then she must've mastered an A during her last years abroad. She scowled her for a while before finally responding;

"Even with my absence this whole time you still failed to covet him yet? What a shame!"

"What?"

"I'm talking about Chris!" Hanna smirked. "I can't believe you're so insecure and desperate even. . .Why? Don't you trust yourself?" She rubbed it in, and it seemed to work perfectly as

Abbie grind her teeth, infuriated. "You know, I feel sorry for you. . . how many girls have you dealt with? As far as I know, your boyfriend's reputation precedes him! He has made several headlines in gossip columns, hasn't he?. . . and when I say headlines, I mean those headlines!"

"SHUT UP!"

"No, you shut up! I've let you say everything you wanted so it's my turn now!" Hanna snapped. "Whether you believe the story or not, it's your problem! I don't owe you any explanation for all I care. . . If you have a lot of money as you say, I suggest you donate some to the charity. . . and stop pestering me, it makes you look even more miserable!" She said and Abbie was exploding-mad as if ready to scratch Hanna's face. "And if it's a consolation, I don't have the slightest interest with your boyfriend--- I'm warning you Abbie, my patience has a limit. . . and I'm not the same girl you used to know!"

Abbie rose to her feet "Oh! I'm so scared!" She muttered ironically, glaring down at Hanna contemptuously. "You think just because you've learned to put on some make up and wear dresses makes you special? Oh dear-- you're still the same poor, low-life, and cheap daughter of a maid. . ." she snuggled around the table, and her petite body rested at the edge, closer to her opponent. For a moment, Hanna got tense, angry at such a remark, she nearly slapped her face, but composed herself with all her guts. Instead, seated motionlessly listening to Abbie's proud grumbling. "Stop pretending that you're high and mighty! We both know what a slut---"

"HI HONEY!" A masculine voice interrupted and both of them turned to see the person, startled. "Am I interrupting?" It was John waltzing towards their table, with his usual charming grin that fires his beautiful face.

"John!" Hanna exclaimed, while getting up from her seat. His grin widened as he stared at the two ladies in turn. "No-not at all. . . the lady here was just leaving, right?" She faced Abbie with a stern look.

"Of course, but not without knowing who this handsome is. . .you've got quite a good taste Hanna, I must confess!" Abbie flushed, with an enthusiasm born a second ago. Her curiosity knew no bound upon hearing the word 'honey'. "Won't you introduce us?" She added.

"I'm John Martin!" John said with a smile, and extended a hand towards Abigail. "You must be Abigail, Christian's girlfriend?". Both ladies were in shock, especially Hanna who wore a stunned look.

"How do you know me?" Abbie shook his hand while staring at him, amazed.

"No-not you. . . I personally know Christian!" He retorted, but failed to wipe off the question mark on Abbie's face. "Let's say we're old friends!" He clarified.

"Oh, is that so!" Said Abbie diabolically, despite the still confusion about his statement. "So, you two are dating?" She turned back to Hanna, ignoring the delicate matter. In a second, they were both looking at Hanna, waiting for her response; she

seemed lost in space.

Hanna felt like killing Abbie right there, but at the same time, she was wary of the fact that John had just caught her red-handed; If he knew who Abbie was, it could've only meant an ingredient for disaster on her end. I should've told him sooner about Christian, she thought.

"Yes, John and I are dating. . ." she answered almost quickly. "I hope after this you can stop your unwelcome visits-- unless as a customer!" Hanna added, pointedly.

"Of course. I should. It's just, I feel like we're going to meet again. Soon!" Abbie let out a conniving smile. "Well John. . . it was a pleasure, Good evening you two" she walked away.

They both watched her disappearing through the massive exit-door.

"Is she always like that?" John snapped, the sweet grin on his face already dead.

"Like what?"

So he heard everything, Hanna wondered inside. And once again all her worries came to life.

"Insulting you and all. . ." he slowly took the same seat Abbie used, without looking at Hanna. She remained unseated. "I'd beaten a crap out of her if she weren't a girl" he said coldly, then looked up at her, and broke a radiant smile. Hanna swallowed hard, wondering when, how, and how much he knew about everything. "Why is this place empty?" He queried while looking

around the tables and realized a strange arrangement; it was particularly decorated with tones of red roses with unlit-candles on one secluded table for two.

"Some crazy rich guy has reserved the whole restaurant for the night!" Hanna replied. She peeked on her wrist-watch and realized she still had an hour before the client's arrival. The decorations , a hundred roses flower banquet, were the least of her interest at that moment. She only wanted to know about John's perfect knowledge about Abbie.

"Since when?" She uttered lazily, fixing her blue-gray eyes on his. "How do you know her?" Her sharp tone pierced his ears. "Victor! it was him who told you, right?"

He politely asked, "Aren't you going to sit down?" She complied, and he answered afterwards "I found out from the very beginning. . ."

That confession was like a sharp arrow on Hanna's heart. John knew everything that had been going on since She and Christian's reunion that night. He witnessed their argument from outside when he went to pick her up after work, and called Victor to confirm days later. Since it was no use lying, Victor told him everything and insisted that he should wait for Hanna to tell him herself because she was too afraid of his reaction and scared how to go about it.

"I'm sorry!" She said softly, "I wanted to--" she hesitated as he got ahold of her fidgeting hands on the table.

"It's okay!" John said calmly. Hanna eyed him up, stunned.

"You're not mad?"

"Should I be?. . . trust me, you won't be able to handle the mad me!" He smiled.

"Oh you-- why are you so nice to me?"

"Because I love you. . ." he remarked.

She walked over instantly, and sat on his lap before showering him with kisses as to no word could express how grateful she was. He responded by holding her tightly by the waist and felt a shudder as she whispered to his ear;

"You're so sweet Dr. Strange!"

"I can be a beast too, you know?"

"Oh really? I'd love to see that!"

"Damn Hanna! Right here? Now?"

"Why not? Unless. . . you're scared to--"

A growl from Victor, from the opposite section of the restaurant near the kitchen, ruined their little intimacy as he slowly approached. "I can't believe the witch is finally gone!" He uttered, ignoring their indecent posture. "If only all the drama from the Ashton's could bring the publicity to the restaurant, I'd allow their influx anytime!". His half-annoyed face made John and Hanna share a laugh.

"Okay I get it! No need to be dramatic dear cousin. . . I promise

I'll never let any of them cause troubles here again" Hanna said.

"You better!" he snapped.

Few days later. As usual, Hanna signed out early from work and went home directly. It was Mrs. Phillips' evening off. She arrived and found a strange atmosphere as the living was a wreck; two pizza boxes, popcorn boxes, soda cans, and pillows all over the floor. Alvin laughing loudly, on his father's neck, and Gwen holding a game-pad in competition with the boys. They were in the front of the big screen, sitting down the wooden-floor.

"What's on earth is going on here?" She snapped.

"Oh oh! Someone is going to burst!" Chris mumbled and they all pressed their lips together, apologetically.

Some minutes later.

"You better clean up everything before I return here. . . and you Chris, you really--" Hanna stopped half-way, grumbled loudly before storming to the kitchen.

She opened the fridge, to find anything proper for dinner as she was already tired. She opted for the spaghetti, then started the cooking right away. She was cutting green onions when she heard;

"Can I help?" Chris popped.

"Yes. . ." Hanna replied. "By shutting up and stay out of my way!"

"Ow, that's cruel!" He grimaced. "Are you still mad?"

"No I'm not!"

"Yes you are!"

Frustratedly, she turned to face him. "Okay fine! I am mad. . . I mean, who wouldn't be? You guys have been playing video games the whole day! Did you even go to work today? huh? No sir, you've been. . ." she kept rapping, while pointing the knife at him from time-to-time. Chris found himself smiling as he kept watching and listening to her nagging.

"Wow!" *She sounds like a wife*, he thought.

"You're smiling?" She changed the tone to a calm but dangerous one.

"Um no! I just-- I think you're cute!"

"What?"

He walked towards her, and instinctively she paced back. "I said you're cute!" He repeated, still lunging towards her.

"Chris. . . Chris what are you doing?" She uttered softly, while clinging at the cabinet where she'd stuck. He ignored her pledge, and moved until a centimeter apart from her. Hanna swallowed hard, holding her breath. His hazel eyes lingered on her wet lips, and then her eyes, before stifling a boyish-laugh.

"I'm just taking a glass. . . I need some water!" He said, and

revealed a glass he'd just snatched from the top-cabinet behind her. He then walked away with a winning-smile, leaving Hanna catching a deep breath.

"You could have just asked you know!" She reproached him.

"I think the water is done!" He referred to the boiler on the counter-top while pouring himself some water from the fridge.

"Oh right!"

They had dinner together, and it appeared they all enjoyed the food; even Hanna herself who usually skipped dinner. They finished with some vanilla ice-cream for dessert.

"Thanks for dinner! It was delicious!" Chris said as he walked to the exit, in Hanna's escort.

"Glad to feed the hunger!" She answered dryly.

He smiled. "Aren't you at least escorting me to my car?"

"Are you suffering from Alzheimer's by any chance?"

"No!"

"Good! Have a nice trip home!" She pushed him out, and tried to slam the door when he quickly blocked it. He looked at her while laughing happily. "Okay, perhaps you have another mental problem!" She rolled her eyes.

"Now this is the Hanna I know. . . I really missed you!" He winked, blew her a kiss, then left, still laughing.

She stared after his back, with a wide smile on her face.

* * * *

Everything was proceeding smoothly until two days later. Abbie returned back at Aroma, and made a scene with one of the employees that she needed to urgently see Hanna.

"What is this Hanna?" Victor barked. "I thought we were done with this!"

"I'm sorry. . . I'll go see her!" She replied. She cleaned her hands, then dried up, before telling everyone, "Whatever happens today, under no circumstances should anyone interfere!" She warned, with a serious face. "I might as well raise some publicity today!" She uttered and made everyone even more confused, including Victor. She whispered something to one of the employees and judging on her startled look, it wasn't something cute.

"HOW MUCH?" Abbie snapped, more aggressively than the last time. She didn't look good either, it was like she'd had a fight with someone before picking another with Hanna. She signed, impatiently. "I have my cheque-book with me, so name your price! I know everyone has one!"

Hanna decided to sit down, cross-legged, dressed up in her chef-uniform. "You're really sick, aren't you?" She said.

"One million? Ten? A hundred? Tell me how much you want to

stay away from us!" Abbie screamed loudly, it immediately caught other's attention; everyone turned eyes on them.

Yes bitch! Lose it!, Hanna shouted inside. "Is that all you can offer? Why doesn't it even make my heart flutter?" She taunted her.

"You sly slut!" Abbie snapped, vividly bursting with rage.

"How about. . . a hundred billion? Can you give me that much?" She teased, with a composed attitude that no one else would've dared to guess what she was saying.

"Are you crazy?"

"I'm perfectly sane! If everyone has a price as you say. . . how much do you think I cost?" She smiled. Abbie was silent, but madly-silent, looking at Hanna. "Please stop wasting your energy, you cant buy me anyway. . . your offer is too sleazy, and if you'll excuse me--"

There was a sharp splash of water all over Hanna's face, and to her horror Abbie was already slapping her hard on the face. This time everyone gazed at them, particularly at Abbie, shocked and sternly at the same time. It all happened too fast that Hanna had no time to think nor retaliate.

Victor and other two male employees appeared and forced Abbie out. "We've had enough with you, just get out of here!" He snapped at her, while holding Hanna who was in a startle.

"No, I'm not done with her!" Abbie continued.

"Drag her out!" Victor ordered and the two guys did as asked, making her screaming like a madwoman.

The following day, the clip of the incident went viral on the internet. Social medias, gossip sites and blogs spoke of it since Abbie was already known as the Imperial princess; the only heir of Imperial hotel. Her name went on mud. Considering her bad tyrannical reputation, It was a piece of cake getting public opinion of her.

Also, Aroma and it's poor pastry chef was a hot topic; several stories were speculated to compliment the video, all untrue like the one that said their fight was over the mixed-up in her dessert order.

"You got what you wanted and I've solved my problem! Don't ask me how I did it though!" Hanna said to Victor.

"You've really surprised me Cherie!" He retorted. "But why don't I see happiness in your face, you've won right?"

She sighed. "I feel bad cousin. . . but she asked for it"

* * * *

When the story about Abigail's scandal reached Christian's family, he only told Theresa;

"I knew someday she'd cause trouble!" He pulled the whiskey-bottle from the counter.

"Look who's talking? As if you don't know anything about these gossipers who live off other people's misfortunes?" She said. "And I think it was all that girl's doing! Who even hired her at such a respectable restaurant?" She tossed the tabled on the sofa and reached for her gin.

"You can't stop finding faults on her, can you?"

"Never! And you better stop thinking about accepting that boy as yours, because I'll never believe that story!"

"Again with this! Damn it!" Chris glared at her in disbelief. "But what's wrong with you mom?" He shouted. "Do you want me to abandon my son? Is that what you want?"

"I want you to stop being stupid and start using your head!" Theresa replied. "That girl is nothing but a gold-digger. . . God knows what she's been doing all those years just to come up with that cooked-lie about having your son! Why didn't she come sooner then?"

"No, I'm not staying here one minute more listening to your resentful accusations! It was a mistake coming here in a first place. . ."

"You're not going anywhere Christian Ashton!" Theresa barked. "Not until you come to your senses! If you want a child so badly, why don't you marry Abbie and have as many as you want? Why are you so obsessed with that maid's daughter?"

Tired of telling his mother over and over again, Chris found himself resigning from the argument. "I better go, this

conversation is going nowhere!" He said. "If you can't accept my son, that's fine! But It won't change the fact that I'm his father, and I'm confident about it. . . and I don't need a DNA test for it!" He gulped the remained whiskey before stomping to the main door.

"Fine! You just do what you want! Its not like you listen to me anymore. . .But don't expect me to welcome that boy into this house! You hear?" She screamed after him. "I'll never allow some stranger's kid to enter my home pretending to be my grandson!"

Carolyn, who was listening behind doors showed herself up and told her bluntly. "You're really something Theresa, huh? Do you even have a heart?"

"Shut up you ingrate! You're the one filling your brother with ideas. . . you should be ashamed of yourself for ruining our family's reputation!" Theresa sneakered.

"Family? What family? You're ruining everyone's life! Can't you see that?"

"Shut up! You don't even know what you're saying! I'm trying all I can to put this family intact, I'm doing everything I can but look how you're all repaying me. . . your father never stay at home, he's always working even after his retirement, and your brother. . . he's become a rebel, just like you!"

Caro sighed heavily. "Maybe you should stop playing God and

try letting everyone live their own lives!" She prompted and trailed Chris in a hurry. She run to the parking, he wasn't there but his car was. She understood right away on where to find him.

As suspected, he was heading to the lake in a small pacing, both hands in either of his pants pockets, seemingly in deep thoughts. The sun was shining bright as the summer approached, giving the warm late-spring an annual break. He turned back only upon hearing Carolyn's voice calling after him.

They walked side by side up to the infamous bench he used to share with Hanna back in those days. It's been a while, he thought.

"You know. . ." he muttered, "Now I understand why Hanna chose to hide all this time and showed up just now!"

"It's because of mother, isn't it?" Prompted Caro while throwing a pebble into the water, avoiding the white ducks floating majestically in their territory.

"She knew I was weak. . . I couldn't protect her, and she still thinks so I guess"

"Are you really weak?" She asked, and for a moment, Chris took his time to think before answering;

"Maybe I was, back then! But now, I'll do anything to make up for my mistakes. . . I'll never let our mother destroy my chances of being happy with my son!"

"And the mother too, right?"

"I don't know. . ."

"Oh come on Chris, again with that? I thought we're past that stage! Or what? Are you saying you no longer love Hanna?"

"I do love her, more than I used to before!"

"Then, what's stopping you?"

"I'm afraid she hates me! She still thinks I betrayed her!"

"So, you didn't tell her the truth?" Caro snapped at him. He denied. "Oh God! I can't believe how slow you are. . . and may I know why?"

"Because I'm done with excuses! Even if I tell her now, it won't compensate the time I've been jerky with her. . . she loved me and I knew it, yet I pretended not to notice until it was too late. I want to do things right, I'm going to win her back. . . but not as the old me!" He was determined.

"Now that's the spirit! And don't let what Theresa said get to you, I'm sure dad will love to meet Alvin. . . and me of of course! I can't wait to play aunt!" She sneered at him and they both laughed out loudly.

"Thanks sis! I don't know what I'd do without you!"

AFTER that day onwards, Christian's life took a tremendous turn. Without even realizing, he started getting home to his apartment early, the days he managed to finish his work in advance of the usual. He'd mostly find his place cold and lonely,

and for some unfathomable reasons, his memory would drift to the day he spent with Alvin, Gwen and Hanna who joined them later on after making a quick-dinner for them. It was lovely, and couldn't get it off his head; he hoped to do it again, and again if possible.

After pondering for minutes one day at night, he decided to drive over to Hanna's place. I'll just bring the pizza for Alvin, he thought inwardly and convinced himself that it was quite normal, which wasn't, because he'd usually drop by his apartment during the day for the past full week.

He was welcomed by the kind Mrs. Philips, who was already familiar with him. She greeted Chris warmly before escorting him to the dining room, where everyone was gathered for dinner as it was already eight. Alvin, as always, was first one to notice him; he practically flew from his chair to jump on his dad's embrace, startling everyone.

"Dady!" He screamed loudly.

"Hey there champ! Are you good?" Chris replied, jovially. The little boy nodded. After flushing each other the dad-and-son moment, Chris finally shifted his attention to the others. He was surprised to see more people than usual; Victor was there and so was John. But his attention was mostly on Victor whom he'd seem more than once at Aroma, as a chef of course. "Hi? I didn't know you--" he uttered at Hanna who was already at her toes.

"Hi. . . I wasn't expecting you!" She replied, incredulously. The awkwardness filled the entire place. "Well-- why don't you join

us?"

"No, it's alright. . . " he quipped. "I mean, I didn't mean to interfere your-- dinner!"

Luckily or not, Victor butted in "It's okay dude! Join us. . ." All four eyes set him up. He shrugged.

Hanna used a chance for a formal introduction. "Um, that's Victor! My cousin-- I suppose you two have met already!"

"Oh yes!" Chris said. "Pleasure!"

"And. . . that one is John!" She said pointedly at John, who played mute the whole time. He slowly moved from his seat, and paced towards the two of them. For a moment Chris thought it was out of courtesy, but then started to feel strange when he got a clear glimpse of him.

"It's been a while Christian!" He muttered calmly, then extended a hand for Chris to shake, in which he accepted with skepticism. His memory was doing a quick calculations that no matter how precise the answers were, he still couldn't believe his eyes.

"John? No! It can't be!" Chris denied.

"It's him Chris, your friend John!" Hanna pinpointed.

"Even if I tell you that I did become a doctor just to make sure I win the bet?" He smiled. It seemed like Chris was recalling something as his eyes narrowed. They once made a bet, that if he'd make to a medical school, Chris would let him have any of

his precious possessions. Because he believed being a doctor was the hardest thing and as a child, Chris wasn't too smart as he grew up to be later on.

"John! My God it's you brother!" He screamed. They hugged in the most friendly way as if it was a dream come true. "Hey, you've become tall. . .damn!"

"And so have you!" John remarked. Few exchanges went on, until the main question arose;

"But, what are you doing here?" Chris asked, a bit confused by the whole thing. "Hanna, how did you find him? I mean. . . when? How do you guys know each other?" Again, the awkwardness took a reign. Everyone stared at the other with discomfort.

Hanna had to say the truth. "John is. . . my boyfriend! We're dating!"

"What?" Chris snapped.

Some minutes later, he was on the road, driving savagely with his mind on the clouds. He heard, and confirmed everything they'd told him, but wasn't able to take in. It was too much to absorb at once. He speed up the SUV as if he owned the entire road, oblivious of the danger he was in, or at least he was to others. He passed the red light without a stop, it was a good thing that nothing happened, except some speeding and traffic-signs violation tickets to be expected in future. At some point, he almost killed a person when he miraculously hit the brakes right before the impact.

"I'm sorry! Are you alright?" He asked the young woman who seemed shocked that he was.

"I guess? Oh God!" She whispered, holding her chest.

"I-- I'm very sorry. . ." he too whispered as he was panting audibly. The lady stared at her, and realized he wasn't drunk, but rather disturbed as she was.

"It's okay sir! Just drive carefully please!"

Once back inside the car, Chris couldn't find the strengths to drive again. He leaned over the steering and tears started to pour. He growled loudly in frustration.

"No it can't be!. . . Oh God! How could this happen?. . . No, I'm going to get her back! I don't care who stands in my way. . . I'm going to fight for you Hanna! Because we belong together!" He sworn.

The End!!!

Thanks for your patience and support; I owe this to you. Kisses!!

Let's hope for book 2 that I'm still working on.

Please don't forget to rate and comment. I'm open for all kind of comments; as long as they are constructive.

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